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**SUNNI AND SHIITE MARTYRDOM: A COMPARATIVE
ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY
EXPRESSIONS**

by

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December 2010

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**SUNNI AND SHIITE MARTYRDOM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS**

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ABSTRACT

While Shia organizations, such as Hezbollah, pioneered the use of suicide bombings as “self-sacrifice operations” in the early 1980s, Shia groups have abandoned the practice since the 1990s, while Sunni organizations like Hamas and Al Qaeda in Iraq have not only exponentially increased the use of “martyrdom operations,” they have expanded the target set to include civilians and now primarily target other Muslims. By first analyzing the historical tradition of martyrdom within Shia and Sunni Islam and then conducting case studies on Shia Hezbollah, Sunni Hamas and Sunni Al Qaeda in Iraq, this thesis seeks to discover whether there are historical factors that can help explain the differences in the contemporary expression of martyrdom between the two main sects of Islam. The main findings of this thesis are that the less prominent role martyrs play in the Sunni tradition, contrasted against the consistent 1,400-year history of venerating prominent Shia martyrs, allowed Sunni extremists to essentially rewrite their history and reinvent “martyrdom” to suit their own contemporary political goals. Additionally, the research reveals that in the vacuum of restraint from the Sunni theologians, Sunni Salafi-Jihadist organizations like Al Qaeda have pushed the boundaries of the religious justification that supports martyrdom operations so far that they are now primarily killing Muslims and non-combatants – a practice that is not only forbidden, but one of the greatest sins in Islam.

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I. MARTYRDOM IN ISLAM

The martyr can be compared to a candle whose job it is to burn out and get extinguished in order to shed light for the benefit of others. The martyrs are the candles of society. Had they not shed their light on the darkness of despotism and suppression, humanity would have made no progress. – Murtada Mutahhari

A. THE PHENOMENON OF SUICIDE BOMBINGS

The disturbing phenomenon of suicide bombings has now firmly taken hold in the Muslim psyche as a form of martyrdom. Whether it was the thousands of young Iranian boys in the Bassidj organization who sacrificed themselves during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the Shia militants in Islamic Jihad that bombed the U.S. embassy and French barracks in Beirut in 1983, the Hezbollah attacks against Israeli targets in southern Lebanon in the 1980s, the 9/11 hijackers flying commercial airliners into the World Trade Center, or during the last five years frequent reports of suicide bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Muslims across the world are committing suicide to attack their perceived enemy and become martyrs for their cause. While most Americans are familiar with the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon in 1983 by the Shia group Islamic Jihad, the first major suicide terrorist attack actually committed in the Middle East in contemporary history was the destruction of the Iraq embassy in Beirut in December 1981, which killed 27 and injured over 100. The Iraqi embassy bombing was committed by the Islamic Dawa party, a Shia group from Iraq that relocated to Iran in 1979. It is also widely known how Hezbollah embraced the tactic, and used suicide attacks throughout the 1980s against Israeli targets, but inexplicably stopped the practice before the end of the decade. Whether it was the loss of effectiveness, the pull back in justification by leading Shia scholars, or because the goal of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon had been achieved is up for debate and will be discussed further, but the important thing to note is that there have been no confirmed suicide bombings committed by a Shia organization since 1994, even during the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This cessation among Shia groups is in stark contrast to the great expansion in the

number, consistency, and theaters of operation where suicide bombings have been committed by Sunni organizations since the early 1990s. This trend originated with Hamas and PIJ in 1993 during the Oslo Peace Process, but has been adopted by Sunni global jihadist groups like Al Qaeda and its affiliates, who are continuing to send suicide bombers to their destruction and promised destiny in “martyrdom operations.”

What can account for the great discrepancy between the use of suicide bombings by Shia and Sunni organizations since 1994 is the main question this thesis seeks to answer. In searching for this overarching answer, many other questions will also be explored. Is there something inherently different in how the two major sects of Islam view martyrdom, historically, that has explanatory value for the difference we see in employment now? How and why did the concept of martyrdom develop differently between Shia and Sunni Islam? Why did Shia organizations, who pioneered the use of “self-sacrifice” operations beginning in 1981, almost completely cease using the tactic before the end of the decade? Why were the Sunni organizations, who began using martyrdom operations in the early 1990s, so much less restrained in their targeting than their Shia predecessors? What can explain the dramatic rise in the number of suicide attacks committed in the Occupied Territories by Sunni organizations like Hamas from the First to the Second Intifada? What can explain the veritable explosion in the frequency of suicide violence by Sunni Salafi-Jihadist organizations like Al Qaeda since 2000, especially by Al Qaeda in Iraq? Finally, what role did the Shia and Sunni *ulama* (religious scholars) play in the development, spread, and employment of martyrdom operations throughout the Muslim world?

Suicide attacks, specifically, are important to study versus other forms of extremist violence because of the difficulty in defending against them, their lethality, and their potential for damage on a grand scale. One researcher found that while suicide attacks account for only 5 percent of all terrorist attacks, they are responsible for roughly half of all casualties.¹ Additionally, suicide attacks have shown that they can alter events on the world stage. Whether it was Hezbollah convincing the U.S. and France to

¹ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6.

withdraw their peacekeeping forces from Lebanon or Israel to withdraw from Southern Lebanon, or Al Qaeda igniting the Global War on Terrorism with their 9/11 attacks, suicide attacks can not only lead to great loss of life and damage to infrastructure, but can affect the course of human history.

A necessary first step is to establish the definition of martyrdom operations, which normally take the form of a suicide bomber. There is a key difference between suicide operations and those that can be described as “suicidal.” Any high risk operation, or when the attacker/defender continues despite knowing that the end result is his likely death, can be described as suicidal. These suicidal operations often generate martyrs since, despite the odds, individuals made the ultimate sacrifice and never stopped fighting for their cause. For suicide bombers, however, the death of the attacker is a necessary part of the attack. For this thesis, I will use M. Hafez’s definition of a suicide bomber as “an individual who willingly uses his or her body to carry or deliver explosives or explosive materials to attack, kill or maim others.”² With a typical “martyrdom operation” defined, further analysis is possible.

B. EXISTING LITERATURE

The sheer breadth and destructiveness of suicide bombing, and specifically its strong association with Islam, generates many questions worth studying. To date, whole libraries full of literature have been written trying to understand and explain suicide attacks. Broadly speaking, the scholarship on the subject can be broken into cultural, rational, and psychological approaches. Amongst the cultural school of thought is the argument that suicide bombing is merely religious fanaticism, citing religious figures that influence followers with promises of rewards in heaven. These charismatic leaders will selectively find and twist passages from the Quran and religious texts to suit their goals, framing suicide attacks as a way to execute God’s will. This argument seems to be supported by many of the recent suicide bombers in Israel, Iraq, Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Al Qaeda terrorists worldwide, as many of these bombers will use

² Mohammed M. Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 4.

religious passages to justify their actions as *jihad* and martyrdom.³ However, this is a somewhat limited view that does not take into account the full range of factors that contribute to the phenomenon of suicide bombing, nor can it account for the large number of suicide attacks committed by secular groups such as the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers, the PKK in Turkey, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Examples of literature that espouse suicide bombings as religious fanaticism can be found in the works of Harvey W. Kushner and Raphael Israeli.⁴

Rationalist theories argue that there is tactical or strategic logic to suicide bombings and, therefore, they are the work of rational actors. Ehud Sprinzak and Scott Atran highlight the tactical logic of using suicide bombers as “smart bombs” that are highly accurate, versatile, able to hit difficult target sets, and can make operational adjustments during an attack.⁵ Additionally, suicide bombers are less likely to be captured and able to inform on the organization. By using a single individual, economy of force saves an organization from losing multiple members for a single attack. However, suicide attacks are also frequently used in bombings against soft targets where a smart bomb is not required, and the loss of a dedicated member of the organization does not seem warranted. These two examples highlight where there is a failure of tactical logic in conducting a suicide bombing.

Robert Pape argues that not only is suicide terrorism strategically logical, but that it is particularly effective against democracies that may be sensitive to high casualty rates.⁶ Pape also contends that suicide attacks signal a population about the high level of commitment of an organization, delivering the message that it cannot be deterred. The

³ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*.

⁴ Harvey W. Kushner, "Suicide Bombers: Business as Usual," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 19, no. 4 (1996), 329–337. Raphael Israeli, *Islamikaze: Manifestations of Islamic Martyrology* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003).

⁵ Ehud Sprinzak, "Rational Fanatics," *Foreign Policy*, no. 120 (Sep.–Oct. 2000), 66–73. Scott Atran, "Genesis of Suicide Terrorism," *Science* 299, no. 5612 (7 Mar. 2003), 1534–1539.

⁶ Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (Aug. 2003), 343–361.

devastatingly successful suicide attacks against U.S. and French targets in Lebanon in 1983 that caused the multinational forces to withdraw from Lebanon form the basis of his theory, and he expands his study to include the suicide campaigns carried out since, including the Second Intifada. Unfortunately, Pape's strategic logic begins to break down when analyzing suicide terror campaigns that are not targeting democracies, such as the extended campaign Al Qaeda in Iraq has waged since 2003. In trying to apply his theory there, it is not clear exactly who the target democracy is in Iraq, nor who is supposed to be receiving what signal.

The notion of signaling is expanded upon in work by Mia Bloom. She also focuses on the efforts of Palestinian organizations during the Second Intifada to increase their popularity and "market share" amongst their constituencies by "outbidding" their rivals.⁷ However, Bloom's theory may only hold explanatory value in situations where the constituent audience is highly supportive of suicide bombings as was the case amongst the Palestinians during the Second Intifada. Additionally, while her theory may attempt to explain the organizational motives, it does little to explain why there was such a huge increase in public support for suicide bombings in Palestine, a necessary precursor for her theory to apply; organizations cannot increase their patronage and influence by engaging in activities that are unpopular with their target audience.

One shortcoming of all these rational actor approaches is that they tend to focus on the actions of the organization, at the expense of understanding the motivations of the suicide bombers themselves. In the case of the Palestinian suicide bombers, statements from the bombers indicate a mixture of religious and national inspiration, not tactical or strategic considerations.⁸ Also, if suicide bombing is obviously rational, why do organizations exert so much effort generating martyrdom mythologies to venerate their "heroes" to justify and explain their actions to their target populations? Additionally, the logic of individual motivations is difficult to understand, as the suicide bomber is necessarily dead, and unable to enjoy any benefits from their actions, at least in this life.

⁷ Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 61–88.

⁸ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, 14.

At the point individual motivations are understood as a product of rewards sought either for themselves or loved ones in the afterlife, strategic and tactical logic becomes immersed in religious explanations.

The case for suicide bombing as a result of psychological trauma and societal repression is made by individuals such as Eyad El-Sarraj. As a psychologist in Palestine, El-Sarraj drew on first-hand knowledge gleaned from interviews of aspiring martyrs and surviving family members in formulating his theories. He contends that, at least in the case of the Palestinians during the Second Intifada, Palestinian youth were acclimated to violence by growing up during the First Intifada, and motivated to commit violence by the shock of watching their parents and loved ones humiliated by Israeli Defense Forces.⁹ The lack of hope in achieving any dignity for their people has led to a general state of despair amongst the Palestinian population, which can be ameliorated at least at the individual level by achieving the status of a venerated martyr. While useful in helping one to understand individual motives of that particular terrorism campaign, psychological explanations are not sufficient to understand why suicide bombings have only recently developed as a phenomenon, and only in certain locales. Oppression and violence have been around for all of recorded human history. As opposed to the rational actor theories, psychological explanations focus on explaining individual motives, but are lacking in explanatory value when applied to the calculations of organizations.

In addition to the broad categories of cultural, rational and psychological are approaches that blend different theories together and comprehensively analyze the phenomenon on different levels: organizational strategies, individual motivations, and societal conflicts. Assaf Moghadam and Mohammed Hafez have written extensively applying their more complex theoretical models, which even include social movement theory, to both the Palestinian suicide bombers, and more recently the suicide bombers in Iraq. These authors delve into how organizations that commit suicide bombings have successfully mobilized target populations, how organizations during the Second Intifada successfully framed suicide bombing as “martyrdom operations,” and how that

⁹ Eyad El Sarraj and Linda Butler, "Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Despair, and the Need for Hope: An Interview with Eyad El Sarraj," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 4 (Summer 2002), 71–76.

methodology has been copied and even enhanced by other extremist organizations.¹⁰ These theories make a point of drawing distinctions between different societal conflicts, understanding that different structural, cultural and strategic factors come into play based on situational realities.

To gain a greater understanding of cultural factors pertaining to martyrdom in Islam, the speeches and lectures by Dr. Ali Shari'ati, Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, and Ayatullah Mahmud Taleqani are instrumental in understanding the basic concepts, especially the long tradition of venerating martyrs in Shia Islam. These three Shia scholars were not only instrumental in modernizing the concept of *jihad* amongst Shia Islam in the 20th Century, the case can be made that they provided the modern foundation for the legal justifications for martyrdom operations currently used by both Shia and Sunni extremists.¹¹ However, while their work is instrumental in understanding the basic premise of how *jihad* and martyrdom is viewed in Islam, and how that view was modernized and helped inspire the Islamic Revolution in Iran, because their speeches and lectures predate the development of suicide bombings as “martyrdom operations,” and especially because they are all Shia scholars, additional research is needed to properly gauge their contribution to the present phenomenon of suicide bombings, especially amongst Sunni organizations.

An example of scholarship that tries to link the historical traditions within Shia and Sunni Islam to modern day suicide bombings has been published by David Cook and Bernard Freamon. Cook highlights how in Sunni Islam, most martyrs were participants in *jihad* or sectarian warfare, in contrast to Shia martyrs who were normally the victims of Sunni Muslims. Cook also asserts that the relatively recent development of martyrdom operations was aided by the approval of the *ulama* trying to reassert their authority as radical Islam became more popular, although most establishment *ulama* tried to limit the application of the practice, usually to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Radical Islamists

¹⁰ Assaf Moghadam, "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2003), 65; Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*.

¹¹ Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen, eds., *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1986).

have continually tried to broaden the scope when martyrdom operations may be employed, to the point where global jihadist organizations are killing women, children, non-combatants and Muslims.¹²

Bernard Freamon agrees with David Cook that suicide violence is only weakly supported by classical sources of Islamic law and jurisprudence. However, he contends that the current justifications for martyrdom operations can mostly be attributed to a major reinterpretation of religious law and military *jihad* by Shiite theologians and jurists in Iraq and Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. He goes on to show the connections illustrating how Sunni extremists such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories first appropriated the Shiite reinterpretations, and then expanded their justifications to fit their organizational goals.¹³

This thesis, however, will take the approach of first comparing the historical martyrdom narrative between the Shia and Sunni traditions of Islam and identifying both material and theological differences. This paper will also explore the difference in the relationship between the religious scholars and the Islamic community amongst the Shia and Sunni traditions, and how the differences in organized hierarchy and prestige of the Shia scholars affect the general acceptance of religious edicts versus Sunni *ulama*. Once these differences are identified, we will see how they hold explanatory value for discrepancies observed in the way Shia and Sunni extremist groups have conducted martyrdom operations in recent history, specifically why Shia groups were more restrained in their targeting, and why there have been no suicide bombing attacks by Shia organizations since 1994. This is in direct contrast to the Sunni examples of suicide bombings that began in the First Intifada in the occupied territories, exploded in scale and frequency during the Second Intifada, and continued to this day in places like Iraq and Pakistan.

¹² David Cook, "Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi'ite Traditions" *Suicide Terrorism Project*, (20 August 2007).

¹³ Bernard K. Freamon, "Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History," *Fordham International Law Journal* 299, no. 27 (2004), 299–369.

I argue that the less prominent role martyrs play in the Sunni tradition, contrasted against the consistent 1,400-year history of venerating prominent Shia martyrs, allowed Sunni extremists to essentially rewrite their history and reinvent “martyrdom” to suit their own contemporary political goals. This can be seen in the stark contrast of modern mythology between Sunni and Shia martyrs that is reflected in the literature published by Sunni extremist groups. I further contend that the less organized and hierarchal Sunni religious scholars, while they initially let the door open condoning suicide bombings against Israelis, have been unable and/or unwilling to rein in the practice with the issuance of strong religious decrees like the Shia scholars did in the 1990s. The inability and unwillingness of the Sunni *ulama* (religious scholars) stems from their less prominent position in the Sunni population compared to the Shia, and the desire to not lose any more respect in the face of growing Islamic revivalism. Finally, I argue that in the vacuum of restraint from the Sunni theologians, Sunni global jihadist organizations like Al Qaeda have pushed the boundaries of the religious justification for martyrdom operations so far that they are now primarily killing Muslims and non-combatants, which is not only *haram* (forbidden), but one of the greatest sins in Islam.

To analyze the historical difference regarding martyrdom between the two traditions, this thesis reviewed the development of martyrdom mythology beginning from the time of the Prophet Muhammad up to the Sunni and Shia revivals and renaissance in the 20th century. To answer the question of whether differing historical narratives affect contemporary expression, this paper utilized three case studies: the Shia organization Hezbollah in the 1980s, the Sunni Hamas during the Second Intifada, and the ongoing suicide bombing campaign in Iraq, mostly perpetrated by the Sunni organization Al Qaeda in Iraq. Specifically I looked for how the organizations interpreted the classical literature, and when they utilized more modern interpretations by contemporary scholars.

Throughout the thesis, you will see how the differences in historical perceptions of martyrdom not only influenced the modern renaissance in Sunni and Shia Islam, but how this historical difference enabled suicide bombings to first appear amongst Shia organizations, and consequently why the Shia interpretation led to the abandonment of the practice. It will also become apparent that without a history of veneration of martyrs,

and with a disorganized and fractured *ulama*, Sunni organizations were provided a veritable *tabula rasa* with which to invent their own martyrdom mythology to justify martyrdom operations, conducted in pursuit of their contemporary political objectives.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MARTYRDOM IN ISLAM

In all ages and centuries, when the followers of a faith and an idea have power, they guarantee their honor and lives with jihad. But when they are weakened and have no means whereby to struggle, they guarantee their lives, movement, faith, respect, honor, future and history with shahadat. Shahadat is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die. – Ali Shari’ati

Historically, martyrs can be viewed as the ultimate example of the belief system for which they were willing to die. Usually, this belief system is in a minority position, or under attack from a more culturally or politically dominant position in their region. The path to martyrdom will typically include a series of events: suffering by the martyr, the obviously unjust nature of the enemy, a final expression of defiance and, ultimately, his or her death.¹⁴ However, a martyr that falls alone in the woods does not make a sound; there must be an audience to receive the message. The audience does not have to be present at the martyr’s death, but someone must take on the role of a narrator to transmit the story to a wider audience. In order for the story to take root and grow, there should be a clear evil to fertilize the outrage of the audience. If the message is compelling enough, and there was a group of people that stood off to the side and did nothing to stop the unjust suffering and killing, they can potentially be motivated by guilt to mobilize and join the cause of the martyr.¹⁵

In a broader sense, martyrdom is used to establish some type of meaning and dignity in death. Stories of martyrs help assuage the fear that arises from the certainty that everyone will eventually die, but the uncertainty of when or how that may happen. A martyr does not seek to avoid death, but instead take control of his fate, and give his life for a cause worth dying for. Once the martyr’s story is captured in the imaginations of others, death becomes a little less scary for those that subscribe to the martyrology.

¹⁴ David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2–3

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

For Christians, Jesus Christ exemplifies these classical elements of martyrdom. The tales of his suffering before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, his ordeal dragging his cross to the mount while being victimized by the soldiers, and finally the pain of his crucifixion are legendary. The obviously unjust sentence pursued by his evil prosecutors, and the capitulation of Pontius Pilate to a sentence he did not agree with in order to satisfy the pressure of the crowds, further enhance the martyrdom narrative. The fact that Jesus continued to forgive his persecutors as a form of defiance, and stoically refrained from responding to the insults hurled at him up until his death strengthen the case for his martyrdom. Finally, his death is given cosmic significance in the Gospels, as darkness covers the land and the curtain of the Temple is torn. After the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, martyrologies became a popular teaching tool and spread throughout the empire. After the Muslim conquest of a large portion of the Roman Empire, much of this material was absorbed by Islam and preserved in religious literature.¹⁶

One of the difficulties of studying martyrdom in Islam is that there is no agreement on when the holy Quran actually uses the term martyr. This is because the word for witness and martyr both come from the Arabic root *sha-ha-da*, and the actual word, *shu-ha-da'*, means both witness and martyr, depending on the context. In the Quran, after the defeat of the Muslims at the Battle of Uhud, in verses 3:138–43, we see perhaps when the definition of *shuhada'* takes on the meaning of martyr instead of witness:

This [Quran] is a clear statement to [all] the people and a guidance and instruction for those conscious of Allah. So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are [true] believers. If a wound should touch you – there has already touched the [opposing] people a wound similar to it. And these days [of varying conditions] We alternate among the people so that Allah may make evident those who believe and [may] take to Himself from among you martyrs – and Allah does not like the wrong doers – And that Allah may purify the believers [through trials] and destroy the disbelievers. Or do you think that you will enter Paradise while Allah has not yet made evident those of you who fight in His cause

¹⁶ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 8–11.

and made evident those who are steadfast? And you had certainly wished for martyrdom before you encountered it, and you have [now] seen it [before you] while you were looking on.

Here the close proximity of fighting for Allah's cause and yearning for death makes it clear the Quran is no longer referring to just a witness, and that *shuhada'* now means Allah will take *martyrs* to himself. Most scholars agree that the interpretive leap from witness to martyr in the Quran is made because martyrdom is considered the ultimate "witness testimony" proclaiming the martyr's faith in God, one all Muslims should celebrate and seek to emulate.¹⁷

The most well known Quranic verse associated with martyrdom, however, and the one found on most martyrs' gravesites, is also from the Battle of Uhud, 3:169–70:

And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision, rejoicing in what Allah has bestowed upon them of His bounty, and they receive good tidings about those [to be martyred] after them who have not yet joined them – that there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.

The Arabic word *shahid* does not actually appear in the latter verse, nor do the rewards offered differ from those provided for all righteous Muslims.¹⁸ There are numerous Quranic verses that are considered to venerate the category of martyr—2:154, 2:207, 2:216, 3:169, 4:69, 4:74, 4:95-96, 9:11, and 9:20–22—however, it is important to note that of those verses, only one, 4:69, actually uses the term martyr:

And whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger – those will be with the ones upon whom Allah has bestowed favor of the prophets, the steadfast affirmers of truth, the martyrs and the righteous. And excellent are those as companions.

The scarcity of specific references to martyrdom in the Quran highlights that the lore surrounding martyrdom stems mostly from the *hadiths* (prophetic traditions). This lore develops and substantially changes over time with the tales of prominent Muslims who

¹⁷ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 319.

¹⁸ Cook, *Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi'ite Traditions*, 4.

are martyred for righteous causes. The ideal Muslim martyr in the classical sense could be described as a man who fearlessly sought out a violent situation with pure intentions to “lift the Word of Allah to the highest” in his pursuit of *jihad*. While Muslim martyrologies do not focus on the extended suffering endured during the process of dying, like Christian examples, the Muslim martyr did have to have a final utterance of defiance, a piece of wisdom, perhaps even a prayer or a poem, that would act as his lasting contribution to Islam.¹⁹ This requirement for a final communication has lasted through the centuries and is present in the last will statements of suicide bombers that will be discussed later.

The fact that martyrdom developed and changed over the centuries is a reflection of the change in Muslim society. Classical Islamic doctrine teaches that Muslims are allowed, even obligated, to go to war to defend their religion, the community, and the *Dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam or Peace).²⁰ During the expansion of the Caliphate from successful Muslim conquests, Muslim society was more war-like and, therefore, the opportunities for attaining martyrdom were almost exclusively on the battlefield. Even in the early times of Muslim expansion, however, there was the creation of a secondary class of martyr. One explanation was that early leaders sought to temper the fanatical rush to martyrdom sought on the battlefield, which often ran contrary to good military tactics. The breaking of ranks to rush for martyrdom seems to even be discouraged in the Quran in 61:4, “Allah loves those who fight in His cause arrayed in battle, as though they were a compact structure.” Some scholars argued that since *jihad* is supposed to be a group activity where individuals are anonymous, individual attacks should not be allowed. The rationalist Mu’tazilite theologians of the eighth through the tenth centuries were not convinced that an individual should even seek martyrdom.²¹

¹⁹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 30.

²⁰ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 300. Classical scholars actually divided the world into two parts, the *Dar al-Islam* and the *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war), with different legal rules for each.

²¹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 41.

The Prophet himself taught that piety and diligence in everyday life could yield the same rewards as battlefield heroics.²² This particular message of the Prophet resonated louder as Muslim society changed over time. However, as Muslim society became less warlike, the methods of attaining martyrdom continued to expand, to include even accidental deaths. The qualifications were diluted so much so that martyrdom lost all of its special meaning and could apply to almost anyone by the medieval period.

Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505) collected most of the expanded traditions for martyrdom into one book, *The Gates of Happiness Concerning the Circumstances of Martyrdom*. In his book, Suyuti cites a popular tradition expanding the qualifications of a martyr:

There are seven categories of martyr other than being killed in the path of Allah. The one who dies of a stomach complaint is a martyr, the one who drowns is a martyr, the one who dies of plague is a martyr, the one who dies in a structural collapse is a martyr, the one who dies in a fire is a martyr, the one who dies of pleurisy, and the woman who dies in childbirth is a martyr.²³

Through the early nineteenth century, the list continued to expand. Jaffur Shurreef provides a very liberal list of qualifications in his 1832 work, *Qanoon-E-Islam*:

1) If a man expire[s] in the act of reading the Quran; 2) if in the act of praying; 3) if in the act of fasting; 4) if on the pilgrimage to Mecca; if on a Friday...; 6) if in the defense of his religion; 7) if through religious meditation; 8) if he be executed for speaking the truth; 9) if he endure[s] death by the hands of tyrant oppressor with patience and submission; 10) if killed in defending his won property; 11) if a woman die[s] in labour or child-bed; 12) if murdered by robber; 13) if devoured by tigers; 14) if killed by the kick of a horse; 15) if struck dead by lightning; 16) if burnt to death; 17) if buried under the ruins of a wall; 18) if drowned; 19) if killed by a fall from a precipice, or down a dry well or pit; 20) if he meet[s] death by apoplexy, or a stroke of the sun.

Another explanation for this dilution in the requirements is that the doctrine of martyrdom was shaped by the religious scholars, who could tolerate the rule of a tyrant,

²² Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 321.

²³ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 34.

but were opposed to the anarchy represented by early Islamic rebels. Another possible contributing factor was the pervasive influence of Sufi mysticism, with its prioritization of the spiritual experience versus physical martyrdom.²⁴ The Sufi apologist Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) stated that “everyone who gives himself wholly to God...in the war against his own desires is a martyr when he meets death going forward without turning his back.”²⁵ This Sufi sentiment echoes the teaching of the Quran that there are in fact two different kinds of *jihad*, the peaceful form of a “struggle” against the inner evil tendencies found in everyone, which is sometimes referred to as the “greater *jihad*,” versus the outward form in the *jihad* of the sword, which is referred to as the “smaller *jihad*.”²⁶ Regardless of all the reasons, by the nineteenth century it is obvious that the Muslim concept of martyrdom had strayed significantly from the original teachings of the Messenger of Allah, and was ripe for a reinterpretation and revival. It is also important to note that it is impossible for anyone other than God to designate a martyr, since only he can know exactly what was in an individual’s heart and mind when they died. This restriction is expressed by the conditional statements when naming martyrs, but these conditional statements are largely irrelevant, since the heroic dead individuals are venerated by the Muslim community as if God had accepted them as martyrs.

To this point, we have covered the expanding qualifications of martyrdom, but it is important to note why it was so sought after to achieve the status of martyr. In one *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad is credited with saying “no slave [of God] who dies and has goodness with God wants to return to the world, even if he would have the world and all that is in it, except the martyr, for when he sees the greatness of martyrdom, he will want to return to the world and be killed again.” Other benefits of martyrdom listed in the prophetic traditions include remission of one’s sins at the first opportunity, immediate

²⁴ Daniel Brown, “Martyrdom in Sunni Revivalist Thought,” in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives in Martyrdom and Religion*, ed. Margaret Cormack (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2002), 109.

²⁵ W. R. Husted, “Karbala made Immediate; the Martyr as Model in Imami Shi’ism,” *The Muslim World* 83 (1993), 263.

²⁶ Assaf Moghadam, “Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi’a Conception of Jihad,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007), 126.

admission into heaven avoiding the torment of the grave and the great fright [of the Resurrection], the privilege of accompanying prophets, marriage to beautiful heavenly maidens (*houris*), a crown with priceless rubies, the right to intercede with God on judgment day on behalf of seventy relatives, protection against the pain of death, and entry into the highest gardens of heaven.²⁷ In the Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali tradition, the martyr's body is not even prayed over—there is no need because he has already been welcomed into paradise.

With amazing benefits such as these ascribed to martyrs, the motivations for truly religious Muslims to attain martyrdom are understandable. While discussing the *hadiths* though, it is important to note that many prophetic traditions strictly prohibit the killing of civilians, defined by the Prophet Muhammad as servants, women, children or the elderly. Rudolph Peters even notes that “all [Islamic jurisprudence] schools agree that minors and women may not be killed, unless they actually fight against the Moslems.”²⁸ The Quran itself specifically forbids the killing of other Muslims in verse 4:93, “If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein (forever): And the wrath and the curse of Allah are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him.” A number of traditions even state that when one Muslim kills another, both will go to hell. This poses a particular and still unresolved problem for Sunni Islam, which venerates most of the early companions who were actually killed by other Muslims.²⁹ The strict restrictions on who cannot be killed in battle should also cause a problem for Muslims in contemporary times who believe they will become a martyr by killing members of the protected groups. This dichotomy between what the religious texts state, and the killing of Muslims, innocents, and civilians by Muslim suicide bombers will be discussed further in later sections.

Muslims draw an important distinction between their martyrs and those of other religions and cultures who traditionally view them as heroes killed in battle with the

²⁷ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, 38–39; Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 37.

²⁸ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, 65.

²⁹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 47.

enemy. The fighting martyr is unique to Islam, because Jesus and Buddha were not violent, as opposed to Muhammad who took up arms as a military leader, and is believed to have encouraged seeking a righteous death in battle, as recorded in many *hadiths*. The act of a believer actively seeking martyrdom became a theme in the faith, different from the other great missionary religions where their deaths are considered an accident, typically marked by great sorrow and misery. Muslims, however, do not consider martyrdom a death imposed by an enemy upon their warriors, but instead it is a death desired, “selected with all of the awareness, logic, reasoning, intelligence, understanding, consciousness and alertness that a human being can have.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the debate over where the line is between committing suicide and achieving martyrdom by intentionally dying for your cause has never been adequately delineated. The Sufi scholar al-Ghazali (d. 1111) seems to have extended the boundaries when he wrote that it is acceptable for one to intentionally take action that leads to his own certain death, as long as he has the intention of creating terror in the hearts of the enemy. Other scholars took a similar position, requiring only that such actions be beneficial to Muslims in general.³¹

This distinction from Buddhist and Christian martyrs, along with the ambiguity of what exactly constitutes suicide in Islam, helps to explain why the vast majority of contemporary suicide bombings are carried out by Muslims—suicide bombings have been successfully recast as martyrdom operations in the last half century. In order to discover whether there is historical basis for the differences in contemporary expression amongst Shia and Sunni populations, it is necessary to analyze more in depth the differing histories of martyrdom in the Shia and Sunni Islamic traditions.

A. HISTORICAL MARTYRDOM IN THE SUNNI TRADITION

With the exception of the 10th century, Sunni Muslims have historically been dominant in the Muslim world and make up 85 percent of the Muslim population today.

³⁰ Ali Shari’ati, “Shahadat,” in *Jihad and Shahadat*, eds. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen, (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1986), 194.

³¹ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 42.

These demographic facts have not only yielded a sense of general superiority, but have also led Sunnis to not even consider other sects, like the Shia, truly part of Islam. The lack of oppression over the centuries, once Sunnis took over political control of the *umma* (greater Muslim community), means that their perception of martyrdom was noticeably different from that of the Shia who have a long history of persecution. It also means that concepts of martyrdom in Sunni Islam date mostly from the earliest periods of Islam, during the great Islamic conquests. One of the most important examples of martyrdom during this time for Sunnis is Hamza, the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, who was killed at the Battle of Uhud (625). He was the target of a bounty hunt by the Quraysh tribe in retribution for him killing one of their members. After being killed by a spear, his body was desecrated and the daughter of a man Hamza had killed ate his liver. While other early companions were killed on the battlefield, Hamza's closeness to the Prophet and the gruesome circumstances of his death made him a symbol of martyrdom.³²

Another of the few historical examples of martyrdom that are important in the Sunni tradition is the assassination of Caliph 'Uthman, in Medina in 656. 'Uthman was the third Caliph, although he was considered a weak ruler and disliked throughout parts of the Muslim world. Specifically, groups in Iraq and Egypt were displeased with his policies and they sent delegations to protest grievances against 'Uthman. When the demonstrations against 'Uthman took a turn toward violence, other companions of the Prophet, including 'Ali b. Abi Talib (the prophet's cousin/son-in-law and future Caliph), protected him until the situation calmed down. However, on the way back home, the Egyptian delegation turned angry when they became convinced that 'Uthman had deceived them and sent a letter ahead to the Egyptian government that would lead to their arrest when they returned home.³³ They returned to Medina and laid siege to 'Uthman's house, denying him food and water. It is not clear, however, whether there were any serious attempts by the other companions in Medina to help 'Uthman break the siege the second time. When the Egyptian mob heard there were troops from Syria loyal to

³² Cook, *Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi'ite Traditions*, 6.

³³ Martin Hinds, "The Murder of the Caliph 'Uthman," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1972), 457.

‘Uthman coming to rescue him, the Egyptians burst into his house and stabbed him nine times, and his blood drained onto the copy of the Quran he had been reading. The tale of a Muslim mob murdering an eighty-year-old pious Muslim while he read the Quran, who was the Caliph and former companion of the prophet no less, provided stunning imagery that shocked the conscience of the Muslim world. Later, the Umayyads, who had been supporters of ‘Uthman, promoted and enhanced the tale of his martyrdom in propaganda they used against their enemies during the Umayyad Dynasty (661–747). The ongoing veneration of ‘Uthman and the slogan crying for vengeance on his behalf continued during the Umayyad dynasty that relocated to Spain (754–1031).³⁴

After ‘Uthman, because the Sunnis were the majority, as a group they were not persecuted in such a way that would generate martyrs that fit the classic narrative. One example of a non-traditional martyr would be Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), one of the greatest Sunni scholars and the founder of the Hanbali school of Islam. Ibn Hanbal was tortured for maintaining his belief in the uncreated nature of the Quran, but was not killed defending it. During the ‘Abbasid dynasty in the 9th century, certain caliphs tried to push the religious doctrine of the Mu’tazilite sect onto the *ulama*, which included the tenet of the Quran, which is tangible, being created like other beings and creatures on earth. While largely successful convincing the majority of religious scholars to adopt the Mu’tazilite ‘created Quran’ doctrine, Ibn Hanbal refused to change his beliefs regarding the nature of the Quran. Ibn Hanbal maintained that the Quran is the word of God; therefore it had always existed and was merely revealed to the Prophet. For his refusal to renounce his beliefs, he was arrested and taken to the court of the Caliph. Despite being whipped repeatedly until he was bleeding profusely, not an easy ordeal to survive for a man in his mid-fifties, he refused to change his position, instead reciting verses to the Quran as he was whipped. Some of the lore surrounding the tale recounts him having a hair from the Prophet Muhammad in a pocket that helped protect him and survive his ordeal.³⁵ While he did not die, Hanbal, a very pious religious scholar, willingly endured

³⁴ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 49.

³⁵ Account from Ibn al-Jawzi, *Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal*, 326–335, as quoted in Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 51–52.

torture that could have killed him because of his dedication to his beliefs, which was enough for him to achieve martyrdom status within the Sunni tradition.

Another difference between Sunni and Shia *fiqh* (jurisprudence) has to do with the *hadiths* relating to the behavior of the Muslims engaged in war. Sunni scholars seem to take a more rationalistic and pragmatic approach, emphasizing victory and survival rather than death. In fact, there are strong prohibitions in Sunni literature against trying to deliberately seek death in battle, as this was too close to the radical Kharajite philosophy. Along these lines, there are numerous traditions that prohibit wishing for death, or even hoping to encounter the enemy. One example found in Boukhari states: “None of you should long for death, for if he is a good man, he may increase his good deeds and if he is an evil-doer, he may stop the evil deeds and repent.”³⁶ This tradition clearly places more value on living than on trying to attain the glory associated with martyrdom.

Another story from the *hadith* recalls a Muslim who appeared to be a brave warrior in battle, garnering praise from fellow Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad disagreed, instead saying the warrior would go to hell, confusing his Muslim audience. However, the next day, when the brave warrior was severely wounded, he fell on his sword and killed himself rather than seek comfort from his fellow Muslims. The Prophet stated in response:

A man may be seen to the people as if he were practicing the deeds of the people of Paradise when in fact he is from the people of the [Hell] fire, another may seem to [be] of the [Hell] fire, while in fact he is from the people of Paradise.³⁷

Two lessons can be gleaned from this story: one, that appearances can be deceiving, and two, that suicide, even in the heat of battle, is forbidden. Classical Sunni *fiqh* also has very strict rules regarding other facets of warfare including the what kinds of damage could be inflicted on different categories of enemies, the protection of innocents and non-combatants, determinations on who was exempt from *jihad*, and treatment of captives

³⁶ Sahih al-Boukhari 273 (F. Amira Zrein Matraji ed., Mahmoud Matraji trans., 1993), as quoted by Freamon, in *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 323.

³⁷ Sahih al-Boukhari 65-66 (F. Amira Zrein Matraji ed., Mahmoud Matraji trans., 1993), as quoted by Freamon, in *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 324.

and prisoners of war. May of these classical rules of Sunni jurisprudence seem to be at obvious odds with contemporary martyrdom expression, and we will cover this more in depth in later sections.

After the early centuries of Islam, it was rare for the Sunni religious figures to be at odds with the Muslim rulers because of their close association with the ruling dynasty or heads of state. Those that were tortured or executed were the victims of capricious rulers, not necessarily involved in righteous political rebellion, and hence did not warrant martyr status.³⁸ As the above review of the classical Sunni literature regarding warfare has shown, there was no great emphasis on martyrdom. This lack of consistent martyrology throughout the whole of Sunni Muslim history is one of the reasons contemporary Sunni organizations have been able to recreate and redefine the nature of martyrdom in the twentieth century.

B. HISTORICAL MARTYRDOM IN THE SHIA TRADITION

Unlike Sunni Islam, in the Shia tradition there is a continuous 1,400-year legacy of martyrdom and suffering, all stemming from the belief that Islamic history was derailed when political power passed out of the hands of the Prophet Muhammad's family in the 7th century.³⁹ Shiites believe that 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the ward, cousin, companion and son-in-law of the Prophet was the only rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and that 'Ali's descendents were the rightful heirs to the political leadership of the Caliphate. During the Umayyad and 'Abbasid Dynasties, Islamic scholars and intellectuals who supported the rights of the Prophet's family and descendents, were frustrated at their treatment and frequent assassination and tended to expand upon their martyrdom. These works became very important in Shia literature and helped to delineate it as distinct from Sunni conceptions of martyrdom.

An excellent example of this veneration of Shia martyrs is found in the writings of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967), which captured the suffering of the Prophet's

³⁸ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 52.

³⁹ Martin Kramer, "Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad," in *Fundamentalisms and the State*, eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 540.

descendents. Although he himself was not a Shiite, al-Isfahani's martyrology of the descendents of the Prophet included the stories of 189 family members killed by the time of its publishing.⁴⁰ The power conveyed by the stories of these martyrs has provided significant propaganda for the Shiite community throughout the centuries and ensured that martyrdom is an essential part of their belief system and history. It is difficult for a non-Muslim to grasp the power and depth of feeling *shahadat* (martyrdom) yields in Shia Islam, so perhaps it is best to let one of them attempt to describe it:

The story of *shahadat* and that which *shahadat* challenges is so sensitive, so belovedly exciting that it pulls the spirit toward the fire. It paralyzes logic. It weakens speech. It even makes thinking difficult. *Shahadat* is a mixture of a refined love and a deep, complex wisdom. One cannot express these two at the same time and so, one cannot do them justice.⁴¹

The first great martyr venerated in Shia Islam is 'Ali b. Abi Talib, who became the fourth Caliph (656–61) after the assassination of Uthman. 'Ali won many battles as Caliph, but when the battle of Siffin in 657 against the Syrians ended in a draw, he agreed to a process of arbitration. This greatly angered those who would become known as the Kharijites, who believed that by agreeing to a process of arbitration, 'Ali had denied God's will to be expressed on the battlefield. 'Ali was forced to fight the Kharajites at the Battle of Nahrawan in 658, where he defeated them. Relatives of the Kharajites who were killed by 'Ali's forces at Nahrawan longed for revenge against 'Ali, and the daughter of one of the deceased convinced a man to assassinate 'Ali in return for her hand in marriage. In 661, the new husband assassinated 'Ali with a poisoned sword while 'Ali was leading a worship service in Kufa (present day Iraq). The symbolism of 'Ali's death is very powerful, similar to that of 'Uthman, with his being assassinated as he was praying and reciting from the Quran at the time of his attack.⁴² The assassin is said to have recited Quran 2:207 as he killed 'Ali: "And of the people is he who sells himself, seeking means to the approval of Allah. And Allah is kind to [His] servants."

⁴⁰ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 52–43.

⁴¹ Shari'ati, 154.

⁴² Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 54.

The assassin's quote of this particular verse is worth noting because this same verse is used in modern times to help justify suicide bombing attacks.

As significant as the martyrdom of 'Ali is, in Shia mythology it pales in comparison to the martyrdom of his younger son, al-Husayn in Karbala, in Iraq in 680. After 'Ali's death in 661, 'Ali's elder son, al-Hasan, agreed to let the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan Mu'awiya, take the caliphate and the unchallenged political rule of the Muslim world, although those who would later become Shia considered al-Hasan to be their true Imam.⁴³ Al-Hasan died a short time later and the Shia recognized his younger brother, al-Husayn, as their new Imam. Al-Husayn remained mostly quiet in Medina, biding his time until Mu'awiya's death in 680. Before his death, Mu'awiya proclaimed his son, Yazid, to be the new Caliph, but Yazid had many problems including being a womanizer, prone to corruption, and publicly drinking alcohol. Accepting an invitation from the citizens of Kufa to relocate there, possibly to organize forces to overthrow the problematic Yazid, al-Husayn left Medina with his family and only a small band of supporters despite warnings of the extreme danger from many, including surviving Companions of the Prophet. Husayn was very aware of the dangers as he publicly stated to the Muslims in Mecca that he knew he would be martyred and that they should also offer their lives in "the path of God."⁴⁴

The Umayyad governor, Yazid, of course viewed this relocation as a threat and dispatched troops to find al-Husayn's party. The Umayyad troops found al-Husayn and his party on the Euphrates River in Karbala, Iraq on October 10, 680 (also known as the 10th of Muharram or 'Ashura' in the Muslim hijri calendar) and prevented them from getting water. Slowly dying of dehydration, the Umayyad troops killed members of al-Husayn's party one by one, including all of his family except one son. Al-Husayn was

⁴³ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 55.

⁴⁴ 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam 197–200* (Seyyid Hossein nasr ed. & trans., 2d ed., State University of New York Press 1977) (1975), as quoted by Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 329.

witness to all of this as he was one of the last to die, fighting nobly to the end to obtain water for the women and non-combatants and caring for his fallen children.⁴⁵

According to the Muslim historian Tabari, the night before his death, Husayn gave the following speech:

You see what this matter has come to. Indeed, the world has changed, and it has changed for the worse. Its goodness has retreated, and it regards good as bitter. Or, there remain only the dregs like the dregs in a jar, sordid nourishment like unhealthy fodder. Can you not see that truth is no longer something that men practice and falsehood is no longer desisted from, so that the believer rightly desires to meet God. I can only regard death as martyrdom and life with these oppressors as a tribulation.⁴⁶

Husayn's belief that martyrdom was his only option in the face of the oppression and tyranny of the corrupt Yazid was instrumental in defining how Shiites came to view *jihad* and martyrdom. Husayn's was not a battlefield death; he knew he was going to be killed before he left Medina but risking death was something he thought long about and decided to do anyway because it was the righteous thing to do. Once surrounded and under siege, he rejected the offers of compromise by Yazid's governor that would have allowed him to live, as compromising with evil was not an acceptable option. Husayn and all of his fighters were massacred, their bodies deliberately trampled by horses, and their heads severed and mounted on lances in a grim procession that left Karbala for Kufa. Eventually, Husayn's head was delivered to Yazid in Damascus.

Navid Kermani eloquently describes the humiliating effect the brutal murder of Husayn and the desecration of his body had on the Shia:

The humiliation of the murdered son-in-law of the Prophet, perpetrated – out of all people – by the leader of the Umayyads, the most fervent opponents of the Prophet, constitutes more than a shame to those defeated [by the Umayyads]. It represents the restoration of the pre-Islamic rule of the nobility that Islam seemed to have done away with. The fact that, in the following year, Yazid ordered a three-day massacre in Medina, and a year later the destruction of the Kaba, completes the picture of the

⁴⁵ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 56–57.

⁴⁶ Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari: The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiya* 96 (I.K.A. Howard ed. & trans., 1990), as quoted by Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 329–30.

usurpation...To the Shia, the betrayal of everything that Muhammad represented by divine decree...is the original event upon which they interpret the entire subsequent and failed history of Islam, which has been stolen by the Sunnis—the Fall of man as a historical event.⁴⁷

While virtually all Muslims are horrified at what happened to al-Husayn and his family, among Shi'ites the horror is transformed into guilt, sorrow, and an extreme focus on mourning that is reminiscent of how some Christians view the death of Jesus.⁴⁸ The Shia often refer to Husayn as *As-Sayyid al-Shuhada* (The Master of the Martyrs) and use Husayn as a baseline with which to compare all other acts of martyrdom.⁴⁹ This obsession with mourning for the martyrdom of al-Husayn, and the rituals associated with its commemoration during the 'Ashura, form a part of the chasm that divides the two main sects of Islam.

Another theological difference between Shia and Sunni Islam that affects their understanding of martyrdom is regarding when and how to wage *jihad*. Specifically, Shiites believe that *jihad* can only be doctrinally waged under the leadership of the rightful Imam. Since the twelfth Imam entered occultation in 873, this poses a problem, since only the Imam was infallible enough to judge when *jihad* should be waged. But this ideology has not always been adhered to; for example, some prominent Shia *ulama* during the Safavid Empire (1502–1779) supported the Safavid Shahs' claims that they had authority to reign as representatives of the Hidden Imam and that all of the judicial functions, including declaring a defensive military *jihad*, could be performed by the *ulama*. This was a significant change from the previous Shia tradition of withdrawal and even dissimulation, which was only made possible by Shia Islam becoming the official religion of the Safavid Empire.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Dynamit des Geistes: Martyrium, Islam und Nihilismus* (Gottingen, Germany: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), 12. German Translated by Moghadam, in "Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi'a Conception of Jihad," 130.

⁴⁸ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 58.

⁴⁹ Ali Shari'ati, "A Discussion of Shahid," in *Jihad and Shahadat*, eds. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1986), 230–243., 239.

⁵⁰ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 333.

Later, during the Qajar period in Iran, Sheikh Ja'far Kashif al-Ghita (1812–13) proclaimed that the *mujtahids* (scholars authorized to infer legal rulings) had the duty to defend Islam by declaring *jihad* during the occultation.⁵¹ The *ulama* did declare a defensive *jihad* in 1804 against the invading Russian army, but after that, the *ulama* practiced quietism and mostly avoided politics until the 1960s. However, there was not, nor has there ever been consensus amongst Shia scholars on who has the authority to declare *jihad*. Although the predominant contemporary view is that “lesser souls” may fulfill the responsibilities of the Imam in his absence (including the declaring of *jihad*), it is interesting to note that during the Iran-Iraq war, the leaders in the Iranian government, which was composed of prominent Shia scholars, avoided using the term *jihad*, even though it was clearly a defensive war.⁵²

The specific differences in Shia martyrs like al-Husayn are informative for illustrating why the concept of martyrdom developed differently over the centuries in Sunni and Shia Islam. For Sunnis, who form the vast majority of Islam and historically were in charge of the Muslim caliphate, martyrdom was typically a choice to fight, a victory and death in a fight against non-Muslims. For Shiites, a persecuted minority, martyrdom was usually imposed upon them, and almost always by other Muslims. These historical differences may help explain critical contemporary differences in how Sunnis and Shiites view *jihad* and the need to justify suicide attacks. While contemporary Sunni literature and videos go to great lengths to quantify and glorify the rewards for martyrdom, validating an individual's choice, there are no comparable materials in Shiite Islam. In Shia history, martyrdom was not an option but something that was imposed, so there was no need to justify an individual's choice. These differences will be important during the analysis of the most common contemporary expression of martyrdom in Islam, suicide bombings.

⁵¹ Moghadam, *Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi'a Conception of Jihad*, 131.

⁵² Abedi et al, *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, 19. Moghadam, *Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi'a Conception of Jihad*, 125–143, 132.

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III. CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF MARTYRDOM IN ISLAM

The life of the Muslim Ummah [community] is solely dependent upon the ink of its scholars and the blood of its martyrs. What is more beautiful than the writing of the Ummah's history with both the ink of a scholar and his blood, such that the map of Islamic history becomes colored with two lines: one of them black...and the other one red. – Abdullah Yussuf Azzam

Amongst Shia Islam, we see modern examples of suicide martyrdom in the Iranian Bassidj organization, where thousands of young Iranian boys sacrificed themselves to clear mines for the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war. Shia militants from Islamic Jihad bombed the U.S. embassy and French barracks in Beirut in 1983, and Hezbollah has a history of using suicide attacks against Israeli occupation forces in southern Lebanon through the late 1980s.⁵³ However, it is striking that since the times of these examples, there are no campaigns of Shia martyrdom operations. Even during the 2006 Israeli incursion into Lebanon, Hezbollah launched no suicide attacks. With the possible exception of the suicide bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina in 1994, there has not been a confirmed suicide bombing committed by a Shia organization since the 1980s.⁵⁴

Even with hundreds of suicide attacks carried out against Shia civilians in Iraq and Pakistan by Sunni radicals since 1994, there is not a single instance of a counter-suicide attack (although there was much retaliation in the form of death squads and targeted bombings). One explanation for this phenomenon is the difference in the relationship of the Shia *ulama* with that of the Sunni *ulama*. Within Shia Islam there is an organized and formal hierarchy of their religious scholars, and the devotion to which the Shia population follows their most accomplished clergy is one of the characteristics that sets Shia Islam apart from their Sunni brethren. Without the Shia *ulama* condoning attacks that target civilians and Muslims, Shia radicals are very unlikely to execute those

⁵³ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah*, Fifth ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 86.

⁵⁴ The FBI attributes the Jewish center bombing to a Hezbollah operative, although Hezbollah officially denies involvement.

types of suicide attacks. However, historically and to this day, the prominent Sunni clergy are viewed as being co-opted by their rulers and lackeys of their governments. Consequently, less accomplished Sunni scholars, or even radical Sunni Muslims with little religious training, have had no problems pushing the limits of what is acceptable within Islam when conducting martyrdom operations.

A. CONTEMPORARY MARTYRDOM IN SHIITE ISLAM

As we have seen in the historical context section, there is little support for suicide bombings to be considered true martyrdom operations within the classical sources of Islamic law and jurisprudence. There are too many unanswered questions, too many contradictions, and little to no religious text between the Quran, *sunna* and *hadith* that would justify suicide bombings. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, there was a major reinterpretation of theology and religious law concerning military *jihad* and martyrdom by Shiite scholars in Iraq and Iran.⁵⁵ This Shiite revival began in Najaf, after the Ba'ath secularists took control of Iraq in 1963. While the Ba'athists and the Sunni minority benefitted greatly from the oil boom, the Shia in the south did not benefit in kind from the economic development, remaining the targets of oppression and discrimination by the Sunni Ba'athist regime.

This disparity led to new ideas amongst the Shia *ulama*, especially the Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who argued that the Shia needed to take control of their own destiny instead of letting misguided Sunnis and their colonial masters determine the fate of the whole Muslim community.⁵⁶ This new Shia internationalism would require an Islamic revolution fueled by the reinterpretation of *jihad* and *shahadat* and a revival of the original Shia concept of the martyrdom of Hussein.⁵⁷ With an international Islamic revolution, the Shia scholars felt they could save the greater Muslim community from

⁵⁵ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 303.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 337

⁵⁷ Mahmud Taleqani, "Jihad and Shahadat," in *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, eds. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1986), 47–80.

going to hell due to the corrupting influence of secularism and colonialism. While there are similarities to the Sunni revivalism that was occurring in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb at approximately the same time, there are important differences that help explain why “self-sacrifice operations” originally developed within the Shia tradition, and not within the Sunni Islamist organizations. These differences will be highlighted in the following sections on contemporary Sunni revivalism.

As previously mentioned, Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq was a preeminent figure at the heart of the Shia revival. Al-Sadr was a strong influence on Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who would later become the spiritual leader of Hezbollah, and Ruhollah Khomeini, who would lead the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Al-Sadr’s ideas also led to the formation of the *Hizb al-Da’wah al-Islamiyyah* (The Party of the Islamic Call) in Iraq, which objected to the secular and anti-Shia policies of the Ba’ath regime. These policies included selling pork, hindering repairs to mosques, the shuttering of Islamic publications and persecuting Shiite clergy.⁵⁸ One of Khomeini’s students published a pamphlet in Persian in 1968 called *The Eternal Martyr*, which envisioned Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala as a political uprising that all Shia should emulate.⁵⁹ In the midst of the Shia revival in 1974, Shia *Ashura* processions in Iraq broke into widespread violent political protests against the government. The recurring protests led to *Ashura* processions being banned in 1977 and a campaign of harsh state repression against Iraqi Shia by the Sunni government.⁶⁰ The turn to violent contentious action by the Iraqi Shia masses in the 1970s was an initial indicator of the success by the Shia clergy in Najaf to refocus their community on *jihad*, martyrdom, and Islamic governance; Baqir al-Sadr, Khomeini, and Fadlallah helped form the lens that refocused the community.

It is worth reviewing the events that resulted in Khomeini being exiled from Iran and settling in Najaf. In 1963, the Pahlevi regime had sent paratroopers into a *madrassa* in Qum, who killed a number of students. Khomeini protested this action a

⁵⁸ R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 122.

⁵⁹ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 338.

⁶⁰ Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 122.

number of times in famous speeches where he equated the students with martyrs like Husayn, and the tyranny of the Shah's government with Husayn's tormentor, Yazid.⁶¹ After being arrested and imprisoned, Khomeini eventually brokered an agreement that allowed him to go into exile, staying briefly in Turkey and finally settling in Najaf with his fellow Shia *ulama*. After Iraq exiled him to France in 1978, Khomeini was actually able to transmit his message of *jihad* and martyrdom even more effectively to the masses in Iran via cassette tapes. Khomeini pulled from the wealth of intellectual and emotional heritage of Shia martyrdom and molded an attractive and radical message. By representing Husayn as a proactive willing martyr rather than just a passive tragic figure, Khomeini was successful in changing the accepted expression of Shia Islam from quietist to radical. He is credited with saying, "the action of seeking martyrdom is among the highest forms of martyrdom and sacrifice in the path of religion...there is no difference between male and female [in this]."⁶² Eventually Khomeini's message facilitated the Iranian Islamic Revolution and he returned triumphantly after the fall of the Shah.

Among the many Iranian clerics who returned to Iran from Najaf after the revolution was Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani (1910–1979), who took a position in the new government. When the government of Iran began to actively export its Islamic revolution, Taleqani's views on martyrdom took on increased prominence. His radical views advocating self-annihilation in the path towards martyrdom took Khomeini's message even further along the path toward suicide bombing and were made quite clear in a speech he gave in Tehran in 1963:

In short, anyone who has understood this truth and divine goal and has stood for it, sacrificing his life is called *shahid* in the terminology of the Quran and jurisprudence. The *shahid* is the one who has experienced the *shuhud* (vision) of truth. The sacrifice of his own life is not based on illusion or agitation of his emotions. He has seen the truth and the goal. That is why he has chosen to wallow in the blood and the dust. Such a person does so with the intention of intimacy with God, not on the basis of fantasies and personal desires. He is above these worldly matters. He has understood the value of truth in a deserved way. This is why he

⁶¹ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 339.

⁶² Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 140.

annihilates himself, like a drop in the ocean of truth... If a person has reached the stage of readiness for self-annihilation through the vision of truth, for the sake of establishing truth, his title is *shahid*. Thus, one cannot call everyone *shahid*. If someone mistakenly or for a worldly and illusive cause gets killed, he has lost both worlds, this and the hereafter. A *shahid* is the one who understands religion, knows his god, and believes in the hereafter as well as in eternal life. He must realize the goal. Then because he has seen the truth, he has no fear of death. Death is easy for him.⁶³

The parallels between achieving martyrdom through self-annihilation, as long as the motives are pure, and the martyrology of suicide bombers are crystal clear.

While not a classically trained religious scholar like Taleqani, another prominent influence on the revival and reinterpretation of martyrdom within Shia Islam during this period was Dr. Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977). While Shari'ati was not physically part of the revival in Najaf, Khomeini acknowledged later that he was “greatly influential.”⁶⁴ Shari'ati does an excellent job of explaining how the Shia view the martyrdom of Husayn and Hamzah as being fundamentally different in a speech given at the Grand Mosque in Tehran the day after Ashura, 1970:

Hamzah is a *mujahid* [jihad warrior] who is killed in the midst of jihad, but Husayn is a *shahid* who attains *shahadat* before he is killed....A *shahid* is a person who, from the beginning of his decision, chooses his own *shahadat*, even though months or even years may pass. If we want to explain the fundamental difference between the two kinds of *shahadat*, we must say that, in Hamzah's case, it is the death which chooses him. In other words, it is a kind of *shahadat* that chooses the *shahid*. In Husayn's case, it is quite the contrary. The *shahid* chooses his own *shahadat*. Husayn has chosen *shahadat*, but Hamzah has been chosen by *shahadat*.⁶⁵

In the same speech, Shari'ati goes on to explain the purpose of martyrdom:

Shahadat has such a unique radiance; it creates light and heat in the world and in the cold and dark hearts. In the paralyzed wills and thought, immersed in stagnation and darkness, and in the memories which have

⁶³ Taleqani, *Jihad and Shahadat*, 67–68.

⁶⁴ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 341.

⁶⁵ Shari'ati, *A Discussion of Shahid*, 239–240.

forgotten all the truths and reminiscence, it creates movement, vision, and hope and provides will, mission, and commitment. The thought, “Nothing can be done,” changes into, “Something can be done,” or even, “Something must be done.”... By his death, he does not choose to flee the hard and uncomfortable environment. He does not choose shame. Instead of a negative flight, he commits a positive attack. By this death, he condemns the oppressor and provides commitment for the oppressed. ... He reminds people of what has already been forgotten. In the icy hearts of a people, he bestows the blood of life, resurrection, and movement. For those who have become accustomed to captivity and thus think of captivity as a permanent state, the blood of a *shahid* is a rescue vessel.⁶⁶

In another lecture from 1970, Shari’ati summarizes the difference between martyrdom in Shia versus Sunni Islam:

Shahadat, in summary, in our culture, contrary to other schools where it is considered to be an accident, and involvement, a death imposed upon a hero, a tragedy, is a grade, a level, a rank. It is not a means but it is a goal itself. It is originality. It is a completion. It is a lift. It itself is mid-way to the highest peak of humanity and it is a culture. In all ages and centuries, when the followers of a faith and an idea have power, they guarantee their honor and lives with *jihad*. But when they are weakened and have no means whereby to struggle, they guarantee their lives, movement, faith, respect, honor, future and history with *shahadat*. *Shahadat* is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die.⁶⁷

Before continuing on, it is worth noting that there is no authority outside of God in Islam that can declare someone a martyr, even if individuals are referred to that way because of their actions and the circumstances of their deaths. Since only God can know what was in their minds at the time of their deaths, others will often reference those who die as “martyrs, God willing.”⁶⁸ The lack of a formal, accepted process for granting martyrdom in either Sunni or Shia Islam generates a couple of effects. First, it means that despite the declaration of martyrdom by an organization or government, that individual may not be accepted as a martyr by the greater Muslim community. Second, and most

⁶⁶ Shari’ati, *A Discussion of Shahid*, 2402–41

⁶⁷ Ibid., *Shahadat*, 214.

⁶⁸ Cook, *Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi’ite Traditions*, 14.

importantly, it allowed modern Shia scholars to reinterpret the concept of martyrdom, and justify mass suicidal attacks by young Iranian children, and eventually suicide bombings.

The Shia *ulama* revival and revision of martyrdom and *jihad* was firmly solidified by the spectacular success of the Iranian revolution. It was this new martyrdom ideology that helps explain how and why the religious scholars of the Iranian government sent thousands of Iranian children on suicidal missions to clear mine fields or overrun fortified positions during the Iran-Iraq war as Bassidj martyrs. In one assault, the Iranian government called “Karbala,” more than 23,000 Iranian boys aged twelve to thirteen swarmed across minefields towards Iraqi machine gun emplacements. They rushed forward with keys to unlock the doors to paradise dangling from their necks and cries of “Ya Karbala, Ya Husayn, Ya Khomeini!” spouting from their mouths, but all of them were slaughtered in less than a day.⁶⁹ As the Iranian government exported this extreme revision of martyrdom ideology, it is no surprise then that suicide bombing would first be developed as a modern tactic among Iran’s Shia protégés in Lebanon in the early 1980s. If the Shia *ulama* thought sacrificing thousands of children to defend the homeland against Iraq was acceptable to Allah, then Hezbollah sending individual adult suicide bombers to die a glorious death defending against Israeli aggression in southern Lebanon was an easy step in the evolution of contemporary martyrdom ideology. Because the Hezbollah is credited with pioneering “self-martyrdom operations” in Lebanon, it is worthwhile to study the genesis of Shiite fundamentalism in Lebanon, specifically the political and religious context under which Hezbollah was conceived.

1. Hezbollah

Hezbollah is fascinating to study as a social movement for many reasons. Although it represents just half of the Shia sect, in a very small multi-sectarian country with an annual budget less than half that of the University of Chicago, it has commanded the world’s attention since its inception in 1982. Hezbollah owes its fame to its ingenuity

⁶⁹ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 348.

and mastery of violence, specifically violence committed in the name of Islam.⁷⁰ This section will analyze both how the ideology of *jihad* and martyrdom that developed in Iraq and Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, spread, grew and prospered amongst the Shiite Muslims in the small Mediterranean country of Lebanon.

Lebanon's Shiite Muslims settled in the mountains in the south of Lebanon and on the plains of the Bekaa Valley, protected by two high mountain ranges. However, while they were fairly secure in these locations, their relative isolation also meant that they were the slowest to modernize and integrate into the greater Lebanese society. When Lebanon became independent in 1946, the Shiites became the outsiders in a state that was created for, and governed by, Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Demographically, Lebanon's Shia population outgrew the other confessional populations so much so that by 1975, they constituted 30 percent of the total population (up from 19 percent in 1921), larger than the Maronites or Sunnis separately.⁷¹ While some Shia were able to take advantage of the new opportunities for education and commerce in Beirut and other cities, most of the Shia population was unable to close the economic divide. When the civil war broke out in 1975, a social movement comprised of progressive Shia clerics and middle class professionals formed a militia named Amal (Hope) to protect the interests of the Shia community. Amal maintained a mostly defensive posture during the civil war, but was caught in the crossfire between Maronite-Palestinian fighting in 1976. Then the Israeli invasion produced hundreds of thousands of Shia refugees that fled to the outskirts of Beirut in 1978 where disgusting slums reeking of garbage and human waste developed.⁷²

With the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the calls for a reform of the confessional political system in Lebanon and the creation of an Islamic state for the now-majority Muslim population gained a newfound resonance. With the Maronite slaughter of Palestinian refugees, the ongoing Israeli occupation and the deployment of U.S. and

⁷⁰ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 539.

⁷¹ Ibid., 540.

⁷² Ibid., 541.

French troops to Beirut, the pressure was too great on Amal, and the Shiite community fractured. Hundreds of Amal fighters left for the Bekaa valley where they joined forces with Iranian revolutionary guard forces, seized a Lebanese army barracks, and built a formidable fortress complete with anti-aircraft artillery and modern communications equipment. The new organization took the name Hezbollah (the Party of God) from a verse in the Quran (V, 56): “Lo! The Party of God, they are the victorious.”⁷³ The contribution Israel’s invasion of Lebanon had on the formation of Hezbollah cannot be dismissed. Ehud Barak even conceded in a Newsweek interview in 2006, “When we entered Lebanon... there was no Hezbollah. We were accepted with perfumed rice and flowers by the Shia in the south. It was our presence there that created Hezbollah.”⁷⁴ Israel’s continued occupation of Lebanon, instead of promptly withdrawing, provided the fertilizer that allowed Hezbollah to grow and prosper.

Hezbollah successfully recruited Shiite clerics that were rejected by Amal due to their being unable to finish their training in Iraq after Iraq expelled all the foreign Shia scholars studying there. Hezbollah also recruited members of prominent Shia families from the Bekaa Valley who felt that Amal discriminated against them for leadership positions in favor of Shia from southern Lebanon. Additionally, Amal rejected hundreds of Shia militants that had served in Palestinian resistance organizations after Israel purged Lebanon of the organizations in 1982; Hezbollah was all too happy to recruit these militants. In fact, the infamous ‘Imad Mughniyya, the commander of Hezbollah’s clandestine branch of Islamic Jihad, was one of these fighters who had extensive Palestinian resistance experience.⁷⁵

Another prominent leader and spiritual mentor of Hezbollah was the aforementioned Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who studied under Baqir al-Sadr in Najaf, Iraq. The mosque Fadlallah built and guided in Beirut would become the center of gravity of Hezbollah within the capitol. Fadlallah illuminated the guiding principle for

⁷³ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 542.

⁷⁴ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 33.

⁷⁵ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 543.

Hezbollah on the use of violence: “I believe that in all cases violence is like a surgical operation that the doctor should only resort to after he has exhausted all other methods.”⁷⁶ The clerics in Hezbollah played an important role in answering the questions on whether resistance was mandatory based on religious grounds, and specifically on whether self-martyrdom operations were justified since military commanders are not authorized to make these religious rulings in Shia Islam.

Hezbollah’s first suicide bombing, after Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, was an attack on an Israeli headquarters and communication center at Tyre. In November 1982, Shaikh Ahmad Qasir drove a car laden with explosives into the Israeli facility, killing at least 75 Israeli officials and soldiers along with 14 Arab prisoners. The attack was so successful and unexpected that Israel did not even know what happened at first, and for years, claimed the explosion was the result of a gas leak.⁷⁷ The attack at Tyre was one of twelve “self-martyrdom” operations executed by Hezbollah members. However, there are some important distinctions regarding Hezbollah’s martyrdom operations. First, all twelve attacks were targeted against the Israeli occupation forces and its allies and were consequently valid military resistance targets.⁷⁸ Second, the twelve attacks by Hezbollah actually represented less than one-third of the suicide bombing attacks in Lebanon from 1982 to 2000. While Hezbollah may have been the pioneer of the tactic, groups that were not Shiite, fundamentalist, or even religious, quickly imitated this method of suicide attack. Hezbollah certainly caused the most casualties because their innovation granted them the element of surprise in the beginning of the campaign, but the greatest number of attacks was actually committed by Syrian-backed secular nationalist organizations such as the Syrian Social nationalist party and the Ba’ath party.⁷⁹

While inherently fundamentalist Shia, Hezbollah is also a political organization with the goal of implementing *sharia* (Islamic law) through the waging of *jihad*. Because

⁷⁶ Interview with Fadlallah, *Monday Morning* (Beirut), 15 Oct. 1984.

⁷⁷ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 80.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷⁹ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 548.

jihad has rules regarding violence, notably regarding punishment and resistance, the Muslim public had to believe that Hezbollah's actions were legitimate resistance, not criminal acts. Shia clerics, therefore, constantly subjected Hezbollah's target selection and techniques to the judgment of *sharia*, insisting that the waging of jihad not harm innocents. Fadlallah warned, "Parties and movements and organizations begin as great ideas, and turn into narrow interests. Religion starts as a message from God and struggle, and turns into the interests of individuals and another kind of tribalism."⁸⁰

The heavy influence the Shia clerics had over targeting selection is evident in the fact that Hezbollah never conducted any self-martyrdom operations against Israeli civilians, a stark contra-distinction versus what we will later see with Sunni Palestinian organizations beginning in 1993. Harik notes:

During the course of Hezbollah's 17-year struggle with Israel along the Lebanese/Israeli frontier in southern Lebanon, it has never been established by any party directly involved (including the United Nations contingent on the ground) that the Party of God has perpetuated a single terrorist attack against Israeli civilians ... Hezbollah made an early strategic decision to exclude terrorist tactics from its jihad against Israeli occupation and stuck to it.⁸¹

Hezbollah's violence can be loosely grouped into four main categories: 1) campaigns to rid Lebanon's Shiite regions from foreign presence; 2) assistance to support Iran during the Iran-Iraq war; 3) operations to free members and affiliates that had been captured in the Middle East and Europe; and 4) attacks against rival movements in Lebanon itself. It was under the first category that the spectacular suicide attacks against the American embassy and its annex were conducted in 1983 and 1984, as well as the barracks of the American and French peacekeeping troops in 1983. The death of the 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French Paratroopers in that single attack forced a full retreat from Lebanon by the U.S. and French forces.⁸² Sadiq al-Musawi, a Hezbollah leader was

⁸⁰ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 549.

⁸¹ Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 168.

⁸² Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 355.

quoted as saying, “they hurriedly ran away from three Muslims who loved martyrdom.” The spectacular success of the initial suicide bombing attacks also forced Israel to withdraw to a narrow “security zone” in the south where Hezbollah continued to attack Israeli forces.⁸³

The destruction of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut in 1981 by the Shia militants, who would eventually form Hezbollah, was committed under the auspices of the second category, helping Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. Islamic Jihad also attacked the American and French Embassies in Kuwait in 1983, and organized bombings in Paris in 1986 to try to convince France to stop supplying Iraq with military equipment. However, when Iran and Iraq signed a cease-fire in 1988, this campaign of violence essentially ended. Hezbollah’s hijackings, kidnappings and skirmishes with Amal and Syrian-backed parties were representative of the violence from categories three and four; however, suicide bombings were not used in support of these goals.⁸⁴

Although Fadlallah initially denied involvement with the U.S. and French barracks bombing, over time he began to issue statements and edicts based on Islamic law that would support such attacks. In the autumn of 1985, in an interview that appeared in the French magazine *Politique Internationale*, he stated that if the “self-martyr” was:

To have the political impact on an enemy whom it is impossible to fight by conventional means, then his sacrifice can be part of a jihad. Such an undertaking differs little from that of a soldier who fights and knows that in the end he will be killed. The two situations lead to death; except that one fits in with the conventional procedures of war and the other does not.⁸⁵

Shortly after that interview, Fadlallah expanded on his justification and argued in an interview in *Kayhan* published in November 1985 that:

The oppressed nations do not have the technology and destructive weapons America and Europe have. They must thus fight with special means of their own...[We] recognize the right of nations to use every

⁸³ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 547–548.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 356.

unconventional method to fight these aggressor nations, and do not regard what oppressed Muslims of the world do with primitive and unconventional means to confront aggressor powers as terrorism. We view this as religiously lawful warfare against the worlds' imperialist and domineering powers.⁸⁶

With the clerics defining their resistance as *jihad*, it freed them from justifying their behavior and tactics to the outside world and non-Islamic restraints, but it also carried rules. These restrictions and a global focus helped prevent Hezbollah from deteriorating into just another sectarian organization. The clerics kept insisting that violence in *jihad* must not harm innocents in order to remain worthy of Islam, but the bombers themselves were dying. Besides the Quranic prohibition of harming innocents, the question of whether the suicide bomber was actually committing suicide (also strictly forbidden in the Quran) continued to haunt the clerics. In the beginning, while the attacks were so successful, the clerics were willing to suppress this doubt, coming up with special exceptions when it would be acceptable. Fadlallah explained:

Basically, it is *haram* (prohibited by religion) to kill oneself or others...but during *jihad*, which is a defensive or preventive war according to Islam, it is accepted and allowed, as jihad is considered an exceptional case ... Allah, did not identify a certain procedure to fight the enemy and defend the rights of the nation.⁸⁷

However, after the number of enemy casualties generated by suicide attacks began to decrease, the doubt resurfaced. Fadlallah stated, "The self-martyring operation is not permitted unless it can convulse the enemy. The believer cannot blow himself up unless the results will equal or exceed the [loss of the] soul of the believer."⁸⁸ Eventually the clerics banned self-martyrdom operations and Hezbollah discontinued their use.

By the 1990s, Hezbollah began to reassess how much violence could actually accomplish, especially after Iranian Islamic revolution failed to spread beyond its borders. Hezbollah recognized the new Muslim demographic realities in Lebanon and

⁸⁶ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 551.

⁸⁷ Moghadam, *Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi'a Conception of Jihad*, 138.

⁸⁸ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 550.

attempted to recast itself as a champion of democracy instead, and as an official political party.⁸⁹ This rebranding of Hezbollah culminated in great political success in the elections of 2005.

When Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon on May 24, 2000, it could have eliminated a strong justification for Hezbollah to maintain an armed militia. However, Israel continued to occupy the Shebaa Farms region in the Golan Heights, an area that Lebanon claims as part of its territory. This continued occupation provided Hezbollah with an excuse to maintain a military posture, continue instigating small skirmishes and to harass IDF forces from 2000–2006.⁹⁰ When Hezbollah kidnapped two IDF soldiers in 2006, however, it provided the excuse Israel needed to launch a full-scale invasion of Lebanon to try to dismantle Hezbollah. However, it should be noted that despite clearly fighting a defensive war against Israel, Hezbollah did not return to employing suicide attacks during the invasion of 2006. Whether it was because the Hezbollah clerics and leadership felt they could successfully defend against Israel with more conventional military tactics, whether Israel had instituted sufficient counter measures against the tactic, or whether it was a sign of just how far out of favor the concept of suicide attacks had fallen is unclear. What is clear is that as of 1994, there was a fundamental shift in the employment of martyrdom operations in the Muslim world, with Sunni organizations picking up the torch that Shia groups had initially lit but set down. Once Sunni groups like Hamas, and later Al Qaeda, began carrying the torch of martyrdom operations, they would set the world ablaze with it.

B. CONTEMPORARY MARTYRDOM IN SUNNI ISLAM

Contemporary Sunni organizations that employ martyrdom operations attempt to create a martyrology that has only a limited basis in the classical Sunni tradition and its perception of martyrdom. Ironically, in attempting to do so, Sunnis are creating a cult of martyrdom around the individual martyrs that invokes stories of miracles and intercession, examples that are very similar to the critique Sunni scholars have

⁸⁹ Kramer, *Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad*, 550.

⁹⁰ Norton, *Hezbollah*, 90.

traditionally leveled against the Sufi saints. In fact, the whole concept of martyrdom operations can be described as *bid'a* (innovation) within Sunni Islam. Examples used to justify this modern phenomenon have only weak ties to classical sources with virtually no examples of similar activities conducted by the Prophet Muhammad or his Companions.⁹¹ While currently there appears to be a consensus among Sunni *ulama* about the general acceptability of their use, there are still disagreements about where, under what circumstances, and especially on appropriate targets of martyrdom operations, between the moderate and extreme *ulama*.

As discussed previously, there was a renaissance in Najaf amongst the Shia scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, where they refocused the *umma* toward a more active and aggressive *jihad*. However, one can argue that the revival within Sunni Islam started earlier, with Hassan al-Banna and the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. Banna claimed that the distinction between lesser and greater jihad was fictional, and the prophetic traditions that led to this distinction are suspect. Banna and other early Sunni revivalists do not actually reject the great expansion of the criteria for being granted martyrdom status that developed over time in the classical literature; instead they create a lesser category of martyr for those individuals, reserving “greater martyrdom” for those who die struggling against non-belief on the path of God. Banna also raised *jihad* to the level of a *fard 'ayn* (individual obligation) like fasting and daily prayer, versus a *fard kifayah* (collective obligation). According to classical sources, *jihad* is a collective duty only as long as the threat to the *umma* remains external. However, once the enemy invades and occupies Muslim territory, it is incumbent upon every Muslim to wage *jihad* to liberate Muslim lands. For the Muslim Brotherhood, the colonial Middle East of the early 20th century clearly qualified as the latter situation.⁹² Early Muslim Brotherhood literature would proclaim, “Whoever dies and has not fought, or had not resolved to fight, has died as if he had never been a Muslim.”⁹³ Banna also elaborated on how an individual Muslim should prepare himself for a noble death:

⁹¹ Cook, *Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi'ite Traditions*, 20.

⁹² Brown, *Martyrdom in Sunni Revivalist Thought*, 111–112.

⁹³ Richard P. Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 207.

Brothers! God gives the *umma* that is skilled in the practice of death and that knows how to die a noble death, and exalted life in this world and eternal felicity in the next. What is the fantasy that has reduced us to loving this world and hating death? If you gird yourselves for a lofty deed and yearn for death, life shall be given to you...Know, then, that death is inevitable, and that it can only happen once. If you suffer it in the way of God, it will profit you in this world and bring you reward in the next.⁹⁴

While Banna was focused on the external enemy, Sayyid Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, the founder of Jama'at-i-Islami in Pakistan, argued that the Muslim community must first wage *jihad* against anti-Islamic elements within Muslim society itself. Mawdudi was instrumental in redirecting the focus of *jihad* internally, when he portrayed *jihad* as a sort of social revolution, "a struggle to transform society and to throw off all forms of oppression and tyranny that prevent real obedience to God."⁹⁵ Mawdudi, therefore, expanded the target set of *jihad* to any entity that interferes with God's sovereignty, regardless of whether it was Muslim or non-Muslim, within the *umma* or external to it. However, Mawdudi did not advance his ideology to justify armed struggle against existing power structures, nor did he write much on the subject of martyrdom. While the Jama'at-i-Islami has recognized martyrs in Pakistan's conflict with India, it has not taken up arms against the Pakistani government; instead, it has focussed on reforming the system from within existing political structures versus advocating for a revolution to overthrow them.

Subsequent to al-Banna and Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb continued to refocus Sunni Islam on *jihad*, especially during his years in an Egyptian prison from 1954 to 1964, when he wrote *Milestones* and *In the Shade of the Quran*. Qutb used stories of Muslim martyrs in *Milestones*, including the story of the Companions and the pit from the Quran (85:1–9). Qutb made it clear that the price for *jihad* could be martyrdom since the world would never allow a free expression of Islam.⁹⁶ Because of the widespread publication

⁹⁴ Hassan Al Banna, *Five Tracts of Hasan Al-Banna (1906-1949): A Selection from the Jam'iat Rasail Al-Imam Al-Shahid Hasan Al-Banna*, trans. Charles Wendell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 156.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Martyrdom in Sunni Revivalist Thought*, 114.

⁹⁶ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 138.

of his literary works and his prominent position in the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb became an important and influential intellectual figure in the Sunni revival. Qutb's vision of a more aggressive role for Islamists was well received by the violent Egyptian *jihadist* organizations, which eventually assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and declared an open rebellion against the Egyptian government.⁹⁷

One of the co-conspirators in the Sadat assassination, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, clearly demonstrated Qutb's influence in his pamphlet, *The Neglected Duty*, which was published and circulated in Cairo in the Early 1980s. In it, Faraj argues that at their core, the Quran and *hadith* are about warfare, and that *jihad* was meant to be taken literally. The neglected duty is in fact *jihad*, which calls for "fighting, which meant confrontation and blood" and should be considered a sixth pillar of Islam.⁹⁸ Faraj echoes Qutb in his condemnation of Muslims who refuse to wage *jihad* against apostate Muslim regimes. However, Faraj goes further in claiming that Muslims that do not wage *jihad* against corrupt rulers are valid targets of *jihad* themselves. Even more disturbing, was Faraj's assertion that since peaceful and legal means of fighting apostasy were inadequate, the true soldier of Islam is permitted to use almost any means necessary to achieve a righteous goal including deceit, trickery and violence. Faraj did say that killing innocent bystanders and women was to be avoided when possible in assassination attempts, but re-emphasized that all "true" Muslims should be waging the *jihad* of the sword against infidels and apostates anyway.⁹⁹ Ayman Zawahiri, who would later gain fame as part of Al Qaeda, which will be discussed more in depth in later sections, mirrors Faraj's arguments when providing his support to the Egyptian *jihadist* movement.

Within *The Neglected Duty* are a number of sections that extol the virtues of martyrdom and citations of *hadiths*, which call on Muslims to fight the infidels to the death. However, the *hadiths* cited are accounts of Muslims from the time of the Prophet, who refused to surrender, and in turn were killed by the enemy. However, it is important

⁹⁷ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 348–349.

⁹⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 82.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

to note that while Faraj's pamphlet clearly advocates violence in waging *jihad*, unlike the literature from the Shia revival, there is no mention of the Martyrdom of Husayn, nor does he suggest that Muslims should intentionally annihilate themselves when waging *jihad*. Ironically, although the Egyptian government initially banned the publication of *The Neglected Duty*, the Sheikh of Al Azhar, Jadd al Haqq Ali Jadd al Haqq, probably the most respected religious scholar in Sunni Islam, published an official point by point refutation of Faraj's arguments. This refutation was widely published, including in the Cairo newspaper, *Al Ahrar*, which had the unintended consequence of also widely disseminating the initial material banned by Faraj himself.¹⁰⁰

While there are similarities between the Shia and Sunni renaissance, there are important differences as well, which help to illuminate the causes of the current discrepancies between the use of martyrdom operations by Shia and Sunni Muslims. First, the Shia revival was led primarily by classically trained *ulama*, not just ordinary clerics or other unsophisticated scholars, but *ulama* from the best Shia legal tradition and theological education. Sunni leaders of the renaissance tended to be non-clerics, sometimes with only a secular university education or no advanced education at all. The leaders of the traditional Sunni *ulama* typically align themselves with their respective governments and depend on them for financial support, unlike Shia *ulama* who collect a *zakat* (religious tax) directly from their congregations and pay their salaries from that pot of money. Because of this, higher ranking Sunni scholars find it much more difficult to take positions contrary to their "infidel" governments, relegating the better trained and more qualified Sunni scholars outside of the main Sunni revival and renaissance.¹⁰¹

Another difference between the renaissances in the two Islamic traditions was that the Shia had a spectacular success in the Islamic Revolution in Iran they could point to and draw on as the new ideology of aggressive *jihad* spread throughout the Shia world.¹⁰² Hezbollah could also point to their success in convincing Western nations to remove their

¹⁰⁰ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 350.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁰² Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War*, 352.

forces from Beirut, and Israel to end its occupation of Southern Lebanon. Amongst the Sunni Islamist attempts are mostly failures as seen with the FIS in Algeria, the *Jami'at Islamiyya* in Egypt, and the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The combination of better qualified religious scholars leading the Shia revival and their subsequent successes is one reason why the Shia *ulama* have maintained a tighter control over the ideology that supports the use of suicide bombings as martyrdom operations. When less qualified and disorganized individuals are fostering a renaissance, especially when the attempts at reform and revolution are met with failure, it is likely that you will see greater willingness to exceed the accepted norms of behavior and more innovation of ideas outside the mainstream. This dynamic is precisely what happened within Sunni Islam with regards to contemporary martyrdom over the next twenty years, as we will see.

Nawaf al-Takruri's book, *Martyrdom Operations in the Legal Balance* was first published in 1997 during the al-Aqsa Intifada in the Palestinian territories, and represents the first mainstream Sunni justification for suicide bombing. Although Takruri is writing in support of martyrdom operations as a tactic against Israel, his work seems to support a global jihadist perspective, making martyrdom operations seem like a panacea for Muslims everywhere. It is not surprising, then, that in updated editions he adds Bosnia, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Iraq as examples where Muslims should feel a sense of pride for new martyrs.¹⁰³ From Takruri:

From this it was the decree of God during the difficult times in which the Muslims live, that the fruits of the Islamic Revival throughout the world are brought to their maturity, and that their bearers despite the hardship and lack of hope will carry the banner of defense of the honor of the community [*umma*], lifting the flag of jihad in order to liberate it from all manner of oppression. The youth have volunteered with their blood without fleeing from life or responsibility, without grief or despair about the circumstances to which the community has fallen, but in belief that jihad is the only way to liberate lands and peoples. So it is not strange that these youths who grew up at the table of the Quran, and believed that "he who overcomes after being wronged – upon those there is no reproach" (42:39) that they sacrifice in the way of raising the Word of God in the world and glorifying His religion and His servants.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 149–150.

¹⁰⁴ Takruri, 'Amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya, 43, as quoted by Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 149–150.

Takruri goes on to list the advantages of martyrdom operations:

- 1) They are a deterrent by means of causing terror among the enemy.
- 2) They cause the highest number of casualties on the part of the enemy with the fewest number of casualties on the part of the Muslims.
- 3) They equalize what would otherwise be unequal conflicts (such as that against Israel).
- 4) They cause the Israelis to think twice before perpetrating crimes against the Palestinians.
- 5) They cause happiness and fortitude to enter in the hearts of the Muslims, and despair to enter their enemies.
- 6) They give the Muslim community the spirit of jihad and martyrdom, and cause Muslims to focus upon fighters and martyrs as examples rather than other popular heroes or symbols.
- 7) They bring non-Muslims to the knowledge of what is Islam.¹⁰⁵

Martyrdom Operations in the Legal Balance gathered 29 *fatwas* (religious opinions of Islamic law) from all over the Arab-speaking Muslim world, which seem to support martyrdom operations. By combining a wide swath of religious opinions, Takruri was able to show a semblance of consensus, a key element of Sunni Islam. However, since all of the *fatwas* condoning suicide attacks are in response to incursions into Muslim lands by Israel, the U.S., Russia, or India, it is not clear that these are not just political decrees masquerading as religious justifications. Additionally, none of the classical Muslim fighters Takruri basis his justifications on actually committed suicide in battle; they merely continued to fight until they died at the hands of the enemy.¹⁰⁶ Further analysis reveals that at least amongst the top governmental clergy, the Sunni *ulama* hoped that martyrdom operations could be confined to Palestine.¹⁰⁷ It is possible that the fear of losing even more of their relevance to more radical Sunni elements, as well as the desire to support whatever the Palestinians were doing successfully to resist Israel, formed the

¹⁰⁵ Takruri, 'Amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya, 43, as quoted by Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 49–51.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰⁷ Cook, *Comparative Martyrdom in the Sunni and Shi'ite Traditions*, 17–18.

basis of the top-tier Sunni *ulama*'s condoning of suicide attacks as martyrdom operations. Unfortunately, this stance allows the more radical and less scholarly elements of Sunni Islam to justify using suicide attacks everywhere, despite the divisiveness of targeting non-combatants and Muslims.

The argument that suicide bombers are not committing suicide was exemplified in works published online by Abu Qatada al-Falastini in 1995. Qatada details two stories from the time of the prophet. In the first, a Muslim falls forward onto his sword when he is unable to withstand the pain of a grave wound he received in battle. The Prophet explained to his followers that the soldier was now in eternal hellfire, which was the punishment for anyone who commits suicide. In the second story, after hearing tales of the benefits of martyrdom from the Prophet, some Muslims rushed off and plunged into the ranks of the enemy by themselves and were killed instantly. These Muslims were considered devout and will be rewarded greatly in paradise. The difference, Qatada argues, is the intention of the individual. In the first example, the fighter is actively causing his own death in order to end his own suffering, which does not benefit anyone but himself – this is suicide. In the second example, the fighter is sacrificing himself for the benefit of others – this is not suicide but glorious martyrdom.¹⁰⁸

Even more recent examples where martyrdom operations seem to be accepted as normative within Sunni scholars, at least with regard to their use in the Occupied Territories against Israel, are found in the works of Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, a respected Sunni cleric based in Qatar with a television show on the Al Jazeera satellite channel. Qaradawi has issued several *fatwas* validating Palestinian self-annihilatory violence, claiming that the Occupied Territories are a special situation and, therefore, even suicide violence that kills civilians is not illegal under international law. In addition to echoing previous distinctions between suicide and martyrdom operations, Qaradawi has also decreed that Muslim women in the Occupied Territories could also engage in martyrdom operations without the permission of their husbands or parents.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Alchemy of Martyrdom: Jihadi Salafism and Debates Over Suicide Bombings in the Muslim World," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010), 372.

¹⁰⁹ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 367.

While eventually what amounts to a consensus amongst Sunni *ulama* regarding martyrdom operations developed, it is noteworthy how long this process took. The onset of suicidal attacks committed by Sunni organizations began in the 1990s in the Occupied Territories, but the more respected Sunni religious scholars were slow to come to a conclusion regarding the validity of such actions. Some, like Sheikh Tantawi, the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo, took close to a decade before issuing a final ruling. Additionally, there are still many disagreements on exactly where and when the tactic can be used amongst the Sunni *ulama*. Finally, respected Sunni *ulama* almost universally condemn Jihadi-Salafists like Al Qaeda who deliberately target civilians and other Muslims. This delay and disagreement is in stark contrast to the Shia scholars who approved of the tactic prior to it being used by Hezbollah, were intimately involved with targeting decisions while it was being used, and were instrumental in it falling out of favor. Again, I contend that the unbroken historical significance of martyrdom within the Shia tradition, versus Sunni, and the more hierarchical and organized nature of the Shia *ulama* helps explain these discrepancies.

Examples of how the Shia revival concerning *jihad* and martyrdom influenced the Sunni revival can be found in literature from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a Sunni Islamist organization that broke off from the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s with the goal of the destruction of Israel and the sovereignty of Palestine. PIJ developed close ties with Hezbollah after it was exiled from Gaza in 1987 and relocated to Lebanon; it has since relocated to Damascus, Syria. Fathi al Shiqaqi, one of the founders of the PIJ, claimed in a book he wrote about Khomeini in 1997 that he had to resort to Shiite theology for *fatwas* that advocated rebellion against tyranny because he could not find such cases within the Sunni realm of jurisprudence. More recently, in 2003, another leader of PIJ, Ramadhan Shellah, admitted that PIJ borrowed the idea of “martyrdom operations” from Hezbollah.¹¹⁰ In order to better understand the social and political context that informed this period of Sunni religious scholarship, we will review the

¹¹⁰ Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War*, 358.

events that led to the onset of the two Palestinian Intifadas, which witnessed a significant expansion in the use of martyrdom operations by Sunni groups over what Shia organizations had previously employed.

In December 1992, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin deported 415 Islamic activists from the West Bank and Gaza into southern Lebanon. Because the Lebanese government wanted nothing to do with them, Hezbollah took them in, during which time the cross-pollination of resistance tactics against Israel, including self-martyrdom operations, occurred.¹¹¹ When the activists were allowed back into the Palestinian Territories after the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords, Hamas and PIJ could not institute a widespread suicide bombing campaign to derail the peace process, without incurring the wrath of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. In a brilliant propaganda move, Hamas and PIJ waited to tie their suicide attacks to specific “provocative” actions by Israel, such as the February 1994 massacre of 29 Muslim worshippers in the Ibrahimi Mosque by a Jewish settler. The Palestinian Authority did not want to be seen as taking drastic measures against groups who were viewed as defending the Palestinian people, nor could they allow Hamas and PIJ to completely derail hope for a two-state solution. So, the Palestinian Authority worked hard to minimize suicide attacks, and was, arguably, effective from September 1993 until September 2000 when suicide attacks by Palestinian militants averaged less than four per year.¹¹² Between 1993 and 1997 during the First Intifada, a total of 20 suicide bombing attacks in Israel and the Occupied Territories claimed the lives of 154 people (excluding 21 suicide bombers) and injured 928 others.¹¹³ Also worth noting was the overwhelming opposition to suicide bombings amongst the Palestinian population from March 1996 until March 1999. Popular opinion polls showed opposition to suicide bombings at 55–70 percent during that period.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, 18.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹³ Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, "Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (Jun. 2006), 1969.

¹¹⁴ Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers*, 20.

During the Second Intifada, however, a new even more lethal round of suicide bombings began in October 2000. By July 2005, suicide bombings had killed 549 people (excluding 148 suicide bombers), and injured 3,682 others. As evidence of just how lethal the suicide attacks were in the beginning of the Second Intifada, the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that almost 44 percent of Israeli casualties from September 2000 until August 2002 were a result of suicide attacks, which composed only 1 percent of the total number of attacks by Palestinians.¹¹⁵ Besides the increase in frequency (at one point suicide bombings averaged one per day), the number of organizations conducting suicide bombings (four different organizations up from two in the first intifada) and the duration of the suicide bombing campaign, the Second Intifada was distinct from the First in the level of popular support for the tactic amongst the Palestinian population. During the First Intifada, popular support for suicide bombing never exceeded 30 percent, but at the height of the Second Intifada, popular support exceeded 70 percent, and did so within just two months of the start of the uprising.¹¹⁶

One does not have to look very hard to find reasons Palestinians would want to resort to violence to strike back at Israel. By the year 2000, Palestinians had witnessed over 50 years of occupation of their homeland by Israel, the continued expansion of Israeli settlements onto lands they felt were promised them for a future Palestinian state, and the continued failure of their leaders to deliver on promises of independence. With the failure of the negotiations at Camp David between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat in July 2000, the Occupied Territories were ripe for another uprising.

Palestinians held large demonstrations on September 29, 2000 in reaction to Ariel Sharon's visit with over 1,000 police officers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem the day before. Haram al-Sharif is the third holiest site in Islam, the place where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven. When Israeli

¹¹⁵ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IMFA), "Victims of Palestinian Violence and Terrorism since September 2000," <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Victims+of+Palestinian+Violence+and+Terrorism+sinc.htm> (accessed Oct. 2010).

¹¹⁶ Bader Araj, "Harsh State Repression as a Cause of Suicide Bombing: The Case of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 4 (2008), 291.

police used live ammunition in addition to rubber-coated bullets to disperse the crowd that was throwing stones at police in the vicinity of the Western Wall, 4 Palestinians were killed and 200 were injured, a stark contrast to the 14 Israeli policemen who were only injured.¹¹⁷ This new round of Palestinian bloodshed after the failure of the Camp David II talks provided the spark required to ignite the Second Intifada. The lethal force used by Israeli forces during the initial days of the intifada was seen as excessive and as contempt for the lives and safety of Palestinians. This perceived contempt was highlighted and reinforced by images of twelve-year-old Muhammad al Durra being shot as he huddled behind his father in Gaza on September 30, 2000.¹¹⁸

A study of individual motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers during the Second Intifada shows that revenge and retaliation were key factors. Sixty-nine of 101 suicide bombings analyzed were determined to be reactive attacks to avenge the killing of a relative or as retaliation for a specific Israeli attack against the Palestinians.¹¹⁹ The other 32 bombers analyzed in Brym's study showed that 27 were primarily religiously motivated, and 5 were to regain reputation. It is worth noting that while revenge is a key factor for the majority of suicide bombers, it is seldom the sole reason or openly admitted, as the desire for revenge is technically against the rules for an individual seeking martyrdom.¹²⁰

Analysis by Eyad El-Sarraj revealed that the suicide bombers in the Second Intifada were children traumatized during the First Intifada, still suffering from humiliation, defeat and despair.¹²¹ It is only through an act of redemption like dying for their country as a martyr that they feel they can gain self-respect. The redemptive logic

¹¹⁷ George J. Mitchell and others, *Report of the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee*, U.S. State Department, [April 2001]), <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/Report.pdf> (accessed 17 Oct. 2010), 5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹¹⁹ Brym and Araj, *Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada*, 1979.

¹²⁰ Amos Harel, "Profile of a Suicide Bomber: Single Male, Average Age - 21," *Haaretz* 24 Aug 01, 2001.; Assaf Moghadam, "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 2 (Mar/Apr, 2003), 73.

¹²¹ Sarraj and Butler, *Suicide Bombers: Dignity, Despair, and the Need for Hope: An Interview with Eyad El Sarraj*, 71.

of suicide bombing can be found in the persistent themes in the last will and testaments of suicide bombers. These themes include: martyrdom operations are necessary to satisfy a commitment to God; the bomber will be redeemed by selection for martyrdom as this generates approval from family and society; and the desire for rewards promised in the afterlife.¹²² While the accuracy of whether Islamic texts actually promise sexual benefits for martyrs in heaven is disputed by some religious scholars, organizations that employ suicide bombers promote this belief, and more importantly, the bombers themselves believe it. One bomber who failed to detonate himself was found to have wrapped his genitals in toilet paper, wanting to protect them from the blast for the pleasures promised in the Garden of Eden.¹²³

Whether it is a psychological reaction to harsh state repression, a desire for revenge for the death of a loved one, or a sincere belief that they are fulfilling their religious duty, the cultural frame of “martyrdom operations” provides a vehicle for organizations to use individuals as weapons to pursue their goals. To that end, organizations like Hamas and PIJ constantly cultivate a “culture of martyrdom,” to ensure a ready supply of bombers when engaged in suicide bombing campaigns.

A common misperception about organizations that employ suicide bombers, however, is that they brainwash individuals into becoming suicide bombers – this is certainly not the case amongst the Palestinians. Recruiters for Islamic organizations like Hamas only have to identify the predisposition of someone willing to die for the cause, and then reinforce that predisposition by exploiting religious beliefs to solidify sacrificial motives that already exist.¹²⁴ Organizations provide the necessary resources for mounting a campaign of suicide bombing, specifically during the recruitment stage, and the planning and execution of a suicide attack. Individuals acting alone will most likely not have the ability to procure the necessary components for a suicide bomb, the

¹²² Mohammed M. Hafez, "Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 2 (2006), 175–77.

¹²³ Moghadam, *Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects*, 73.

¹²⁴ Sprinzak, *Rational Fanatics*, 69.

technical know-how to create a successful device, the intelligence-gathering capability to plan an attack, or the logistical resources for effective execution.¹²⁵ While there may be rare instances of individuals acting on their own committing suicide attacks, they obviously would find it difficult to mount a suicide bombing campaign on their own, especially if their first attack is successful.

During the height of the Second Intifada, the Palestinian population became so mobilized and supportive of the suicide bombers that there were too many volunteers for martyrdom operations and organizations had to turn people away. This extreme radicalization of the population also led to very short training phases, sometimes with only a few days' turn-around between when a volunteer signed up and when they executed the attack. Normally, there is a longer period of cleansing and purification during training. A candidate will receive religious indoctrination, watch anti-Israeli propaganda, go on lengthy fasts, pay off all his debts, ask for forgiveness for all his sins in nightly prayers, and finally record a last will and testament statement.¹²⁶ The making of a video fulfills multiple purposes: it gives the martyr a chance to say farewell to his loved ones, explains his motivations, and provides a powerful incentive for the bomber to carry through on his attack, as changing his mind will be seen as a shameful betrayal to his faith, family and nation. The desired result of the training process is a bomber with the moral, political and religious justification needed to successfully execute his attack on behalf of the organization.

Why organizations employ suicide attacks is another matter. In the case of the Palestinian groups that resort to this tactic, they cite the effectiveness of the tactic in relation to other forms of resistance.¹²⁷ Palestinian factions have little chance of standing up directly to the Israeli forces with its vastly superior firepower and resources. However, they believe that by going after soft targets, like the Israeli populace, they can

¹²⁵ Moghadam, *Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects*, 76.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 84.

¹²⁷ Hafez, *Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study*, 173.

achieve a strategic “balance of terror.” Hamas published in their London-based journal, *Falastin al-Muslima* (Islamic Palestine) articles that suicide bombing campaigns decreased the rate of Israeli settlements, decreased tourism hurting the Israeli economy, and increased the rate of desertion amongst the Israeli military as soldiers refused to serve in the territories.¹²⁸ Other claims made by radical organizations are that since negotiations have yet to produce an Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian lands, suicide bombings are a preferred military tactic that works. These organizations cite how Hezbollah successfully used the tactic to drive Israel out of Southern Lebanon, and how Hamas has successfully derailed the peace process they are opposed to multiple times, by employing suicide bombings. To further understand organizational motives, it is useful to analyze in depth one of the first organizations to resort to suicide bombings in the Occupied Territories, the organization responsible for the largest number of suicide attacks in the territories, and the current de facto government in the Gaza Strip — Hamas.

1. Hamas

The *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, (Islamic Resistance Movement) better known by its acronym Hamas, was founded in 1987 during the First Intifada as the new underground wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip. The founding members of Hamas felt it was necessary to rebrand the organization as distinct from the Muslim Brotherhood because the Muslim Brotherhood had been corrupted by western ideologies.¹²⁹ As an Islamist organization, Hamas hoped to increase its political power by aligning its ideology as a contrast to the secular nationalist Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Hamas argues that Palestine can only be liberated through Islamic ideology that can fully mobilize the people, not under human-derived banners. By attempting to reframe their resistance movement as a religious war between Islam and Judaism, Hamas benefits from increased support from like-minded Muslims, both within the Occupied Territories and internationally.

¹²⁸ Hafez, *Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study*, 174–75.

¹²⁹ Meir Litvak, "The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (Jan. 1998), 149, 158.

One of the major differences between the Hamas and the PLO was in how the PLO made a clear distinction between Jews and Zionists, arguing that the Palestinians are only fighting the forces of Zionism that are stealing Palestinian lands, not Jews in general. Hamas redefines the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as part of the broader struggle between the West and Islam, dating all the way back to the Crusades and through Imperial times. Hamas literature describes the struggle as an “existential battle and not just a question of borders.”¹³⁰ Continuing the religious war theme, one of Hamas’ founders, Ibrahim Quqa, goes so far as to frame Israel’s poor treatment of the Palestinians as revenge for Muhammad’s victories over the Jewish tribes in Medina. Hamas literature is also typically very racist in nature, as it groups all Jews together and describes them as “the bloodsucker of mankind,” “racists” and “criminals.”¹³¹

Another difference between the current Palestinian Authority and Hamas is in how they articulate their goals. Hamas avoids some criticism of failure because it has never articulated a short term strategy or goals, arguing the conflict should be viewed not in years, but in decades; that the road to victory is long, but its outcome has been predetermined by God. For the Palestinians to succeed, it requires a devotion to Islam, following the right path, and forbearance.¹³² Hamas points to the decline of the Soviet Union as an example of a mighty power that eventually crumbled after decades.

Unlike the Palestinian Authority, Hamas also maintains that all of Palestine is a sacred *waqf* (religious endowment) from God, and no one on earth can negotiate parts of it away. This has led to the oft-publicized stance Hamas holds that the existence of the state of Israel is sacrilege and must be eliminated as a state. Hamas’ official position is that the Jews currently there would be able to remain in the new Palestinian Islamic state and will even enjoy cultural and religious autonomy as they did historically under Islamic law.¹³³ Since Israeli Jews are not likely to agree to this, Hamas is content to fight a holy

¹³⁰ Litvak, *The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas*, 150.

¹³¹ Kushner, *Suicide Bombers: Business as Usual*, 1053.

¹³² Litvak, *The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas*, 154.

¹³³ Litvak, *The Islamization of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Case of Hamas*, 156.

war until final victory. Some scholars point out that, realistically, Hamas would have to accept a two-state solution based on U.N. resolutions 242 and 338 because of popular pressure, but Hamas argues that negotiations will never lead to that goal so they are not concerned about that possibility.¹³⁴ Based on the historic failure of peace talks and the continued expansion of Israeli settlements on lands the Palestinians are expecting to become part of their state, it is hard to criticize Hamas' negative assessment. As such, Hamas' mantra states that "Wherever a military occupation exists, a military resistance should be expected and exercised. Such a resistance, taking various forms, would only stop when the occupation ends."¹³⁵ The most celebrated and, depending on your point of view, "effective" form of resistance Hamas has found, so far, is the suicide bomber.

When analyzing why Palestinian organizations utilize suicide bombers, some noteworthy distinctions are apparent. First of all, in the First Intifada, only the Islamist organizations PIJ and Hamas utilized suicide bombing: no secular organizations did. During the Second Intifada, while eventually the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade division of secular Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine both utilized suicide bombers, it was only after a distinct delay behind Islamist Hamas and PIJ. In fact, the Popular Front did not resort to suicide bombing until October 2001, two months after assassination of its leader. In the end, the Popular Front only accounted for 2 percent of the total suicide bombing attacks during the Second Intifada, compared to 44 percent for Hamas, 32 percent for Fatah, and 22 percent for PIJ.¹³⁶ For its part, the top leadership of Fatah claims it did not plan on utilizing suicide bombers during the Second Intifada at all. Interviews with Fatah leadership revealed that the decision to begin suicide bombing was made "from below" by local leaders in response to Israel's harsh repression tactics and the popular support for the martyrdom campaigns being waged by Hamas and PIJ.¹³⁷ It

¹³⁴ Khaled Hroub, "Hamas After Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 4 (Summer, 2004), 23.

¹³⁵ Ahmad Yassin, *Filistin Al-Muslima*, September (2003), 20–23.

¹³⁶ Araj, *Harsh State Repression as a Cause of Suicide Bombing: The Case of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 294.

¹³⁷ Araj, *Harsh State Repression as a Cause of Suicide Bombing: The Case of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 295.

is only natural that suicide bombing is not openly promoted by secular organizations, as they have a more difficult time credibly tapping into the religious nature of martyrdom operations. Hamas, on the other hand, is able to release leaflets that claim:

Every day the earth absorbs the blood of the righteous, [and] kneels in front of the graves and bows before the martyrs of grace. This is part of the price of pride and honor, liberation and salvation. This is the dowry of those with lovely eyes [the *houris*], a substitute for paradise. “Behold! God had brought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise...” [Quran 9:111]¹³⁸

Another development that helped Islamist organizations in portraying *jihad* as the correct way to fight Israeli expansion was the distinct change in how Israel was portrayed (weak) before the 1967 war, and how it was portrayed after its stunning victory (almost all-powerful). Radical Islamist organizations like Hamas even believe there is a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world as portrayed in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Even though *The Protocols* was revealed long ago to be a Russian anti-Semitic forgery, the fact that many Islamists still believe it explains why they argue they are in an existential battle with Israel.¹³⁹

Although Hamas is an Islamist organization, among its leadership the decision to engage in a suicide bombing campaign is seen as a strategic decision rather than religiously motivated. One study found that the timing and execution of the majority of the suicide attacks committed by Hamas over the years to be based on political factors, specifically to spoil any progress in the peace process.¹⁴⁰ Another study specifically focused on the Second Intifada found the timing of the suicide attacks were a response to harsh Israeli tactics 82 percent of the time.¹⁴¹ A good example of this response dynamic is from June 2003, when Egypt, under strong American pressure, successfully got Hamas and PIJ to declare a three-month *hudna* (temporary cease-fire), with corresponding

¹³⁸ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 144.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴⁰ Bloom, *Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding*, 62.

¹⁴¹ Brym and Araj, *Suicide Bombing as Strategy and Interaction: The Case of the Second Intifada*, 1978.

requirements on Israel to stop attacking the Palestinian people, lift the siege on Palestinian towns, and release Palestinian prisoners. While Hamas and PIJ were honoring the *hudna* with no suicide attacks for 7 weeks, Israel ignored the temporary cease-fire, considering it an internal Palestinian matter, and mounted a large arrest and assassination campaign against Hamas during that time. Ironically, on 7 August 2003, Israeli helicopters assassinated Isma'il Abu Shanab, a moderate voice within Hamas and the “engineer” of the *hudna*.¹⁴² Hamas immediately resumed martyrdom operations and the cycle of death in the Second Intifada continued. This cycle resulted in such a high death toll, fear and anger amongst Palestinian civilians, that popular support for suicide bombing remained above 60 percent throughout the Second Intifada.¹⁴³ This popular support for suicide bombings as a reaction to Israeli tactics provided organizations like Hamas a key structural factor they needed to promote a culture of martyrdom.

While organizations like Hamas attempt to exploit cultural frames, the frames have to already exist in order for the message of organizations using them to be received and internalized by a target population. An analysis of existing cultural frames that venerate martyrs within Islam, and by extension within the Palestinian territories, is necessary to understand why Sheikh Abdul Aziz Rantisi, the second highest ranking (and briefly the highest ranking Hamas leader until he was assassinated by Israel in April 2004), would claim “For Hamas, and Palestinian society in general, becoming a martyr is among the highest, if not the highest, honor.”¹⁴⁴

In order to understand the general acceptance of suicidal violence amongst the Palestinians, one has to recognize the Islamic revival within Muslim societies that began in the 1970s. Once pan-Arab nationalism was essentially discredited as a secular ideology with the disastrous Arab showing in the 1967 war with Israel, Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood stepped in to fill the vacuum with their message that the current sad state of the Arab world was due to the lack of piety amongst

¹⁴² Hroub, *Hamas After Shaykh Yasin and Rantisi*, 28.

¹⁴³ Araj, *Harsh State Repression as a Cause of Suicide Bombing: The Case of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, 291.

¹⁴⁴ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 187–88.

the *umma* (Muslim community). The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan gave credence to this growing Islamist movement, leading to increased mosque attendance, the spread of Islamist networks at universities, and ultimately Islamist political parties.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, Islamist movements like Hamas have successfully delivered medical care, dentistry and other social services otherwise unavailable to the Palestinians under occupation.¹⁴⁶ The overall success of Islamist movements allowed religious appeals to receive greater acceptance, and religious symbolism to resonate louder within Muslim populations. This newfound religiosity is exemplified in the typical Quranic verses found in the last will and testaments of suicide bombers:

2:154 – And call not those who are slain in the way of Allah “dead.” Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not.

4:69 – Whoso obeyeth Allah and the messenger, they are with those unto whom Allah hath shown favor, of the Prophets and the saints and the martyrs and the righteous. The best of company are they!

9:14 – Fight them; Allah will chastise them at your hands and bring them to disgrace, and assist you against them and relieve the hearts of a believing people.

These Quranic texts are emblematic of the larger narrative of martyrdom that Islamist organizations cultivate, where suicide bombers reflect the heroic struggle of the Prophet Muhammad who prevailed against overwhelming odds against the enemies of the early Islamic community.¹⁴⁷ Supplementing the very popular martyrdom videos are posters everywhere venerating the bombers as heroes, and even digitally-altered pictures of Palestinian children killed by Israeli attacks holding rifles.¹⁴⁸ A selective version of the role of martyrs in Islamic history and their rewards are published in periodicals by Islamist organizations. Benefits guaranteed to the *shahid* (martyr) include: 1) instant

¹⁴⁵ Hafez, *Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study*, 177.

¹⁴⁶ Bloom, *Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding*, 77.

¹⁴⁷ Hafez, *Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study*, 178.

¹⁴⁸ Lori Allen, "There are Many Reasons Why: Suicide Bombers and Martyrs in Palestine," *Middle East Report*, no. 223 (Summer, 2002), 34–35.

forgiveness for all their sins, 2) a seat in Heaven, 3) a trophy of faith, 4) marriage to 72 beauties, 5) a crown with priceless jewels, and 6) the ability to intercede and erase the sins of 70 relatives on judgment day.¹⁴⁹ Even the parents of the bombers appear happy and proud in televised interviews when told their child has just blown themselves up and killed others.¹⁵⁰

Normally, one would expect voices of authority to combat this veneration of suicide bombers as heroes, but instead the Palestinian Authority and some prominent Muslim religious scholars were complicit in a number of ways. Official news reports were obviously one-sided in their depictions of the daily killings, with every Israeli attack depicted as a massacre with scenes of Palestinian youths being killed to a background of dramatic music with nationalist lyrics. Notable religious figures such as Sheikh 'Akrama Sabri, Chief Mufti of Jerusalem; Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Mufti of Egypt, and the aforementioned Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi, all confirmed the right of Palestinians to conduct "martyrdom operations" against Israelis.¹⁵¹ With the failure of both the governmental and religious authorities to even attempt to combat the messaging of suicide bombing as heroic martyrdom, Islamist groups like Hamas were highly successful in establishing a new cultural frame. Without this new cultural frame, Palestinian militants would not have been able to mainstream the acceptance of "martyrdom operations," nor generate the numbers of volunteers necessary for the massive scale of the suicide bombing campaign conducted from 2000–2005. Sadly, as massive as the suicide bombing campaign of the Second Intifada was at the time, it pales in comparison to the suicide bombing campaign unleashed by Global Salafi-Jihadist organizations like Al Qaeda in Iraq since 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Hilal Khashan, "Collective Palestinian Frustration and Suicide Bombings," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (Dec. 2003), 1052.

¹⁵⁰ David Broooks, "The Culture of Martyrdom," *The Atlantic Monthly* 289, no. 6 (2002), 19.

¹⁵¹ Hafez, *Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study*, 179.

2. Al Qaeda in Iraq

In the 1990s, Hamas and PIJ used suicide bombers on 28 occasions against Israeli targets.¹⁵² During the Second Intifada, from October 2000 through February 2005, 116 suicide attacks took place.¹⁵³ However, from March 2003 through August 2006, there were 514 suicide attacks in Iraq, more than all the previous insurgent groups combined, including Hezbollah, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and Hamas in Israel.¹⁵⁴ While it is not known definitively who is committing the majority of the suicide attacks in Iraq (58 percent are unclaimed), of the suicide attacks that were claimed from 2003 through 2006, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) claimed responsibility for 71 percent (30 percent of the total). Ansar al-Sunna and miscellaneous Baathist organizations claimed responsibility for 10 percent of the remaining (5 percent each) and the remaining two percent was divided among Ansar al-Islam and miscellaneous other.¹⁵⁵ What stands as a remarkable development in Iraq, however, is that the vast majority of the targets of suicide bombings in Iraq are Iraqi security forces and Shia civilians, not coalition forces. Additionally, the bombers are mainly non-Iraqis, but are from Saudi Arabia, Europe, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan and North Africa. Most of these can be described as “second generation” jihadists who trained in Afghanistan in the 1990s or fled their home countries to avoid being arrested.¹⁵⁶

Because of the difference from the Hezbollah and Hamas suicide bombing campaigns discussed previously, it is important to discuss reasons why the majority of suicide bombings go unclaimed in Iraq. First of all, because the attacks are targeting Iraqi civilians, they are immensely unpopular, even amongst the Sunni population that has grievances against the Shia majority. With the majority of suicide attacks targeting

¹⁵² Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 23.

¹⁵³ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵⁶ Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, 5.

civilians, they are also perceived as religiously unjustifiable, so the bombers are not venerated as martyrs by the general populace. Second, because the majority of martyrdom operations are being committed by foreign jihadists, they are even less likely to be received by Iraqis as supporting their interests and the jihadist organizations do not want to unnecessarily reveal their international networks of support. In the rare cases where an Iraqi commits the attack, it makes sense that their identity is not revealed, so as to avoid retribution from the Shia or Kurdish population.¹⁵⁷ The combination of the unpopularity of the targeting of civilians, combined with the anonymity of the bombers themselves, ensures that a culture of martyrdom that developed in the occupied territories is unlikely to develop in Iraq. The fact that AQI does not even bother to release the martyrology propaganda that so permeated the Palestinian society during the second intifada is also an indication that they know, themselves, they are on thin theological ice.

Jihadi Salafist organizations like AQI are aggressively using suicide bombings against the Shia majority that is currently in power, pursuing a strategy of “system collapse.” Essentially AQI is using suicide attacks to incite a sectarian civil war that will cause the tenuous new government to completely fail, at which point they can replace it with an Islamic emirate based on Sunni dominance similar to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. While the Baathists want their previous political power back from the Shia, Salafis refuse to live under what they consider to be heretical Shia rule. Jihadi Salafis are distinct from the Islamic and nationalist insurgents in Iraq in their ideological emphasis. Although they all share the common goals of expelling the foreign forces from Iraq, the Islamic and nationalist insurgents view the war in Iraq as a defensive war against foreign invaders who are responsible for dividing Iraq along sectarian lines and handing power over to Iranian-backed Shia and U.S.-backed Kurdish factions in an effort to plunder Iraq’s oil wealth.¹⁵⁸

Jihadi Salafists groups, which are mostly composed of foreigners, hope to establish a new powerbase in Iraq from where they can wage international *jihad*. Iraq is

¹⁵⁷ Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, 106–07.

¹⁵⁸ Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, 72.

viewed as a potential new safe haven and center of gravity, a replacement for Afghanistan, which they lost when the Taliban regime fell.¹⁵⁹ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi repeatedly stated in a fifty-minute video montage by Al Qaeda that “We are not fighting for illusionary borders drawn by Sykes-Picot. Nor are we fighting to replace a Western tyrant with an Arab tyrant. Our *jihad* is more honorable than that. We fight to raise God’s word on earth.”¹⁶⁰ In another quote by Zarqawi from an internal Al Qaeda report, he is critical of other insurgent groups that are not employing martyrdom operations:

We have told them in our many sessions with them that safety and victory are incompatible, the tree of triumph and empowerment cannot grow tall and lofty without blood and defiance of death...People cannot awaken from their stupor unless talk of martyrdom and martyrs fills their days and nights.

What is revealing in this passage is that the foreign jihadists are working to convince their Iraqi brothers that they need to adopt the tactics of martyrdom. This is further evidence that suicide attacks were not an indigenous development of Iraqi insurgents, but rather an imported tactic based on a foreign ideology.¹⁶¹ Jihadi Salafi ideology strongly emphasizes martyrdom, which when combined with malignant anti-Shia rhetoric, allows them to dehumanize and de-Muslimize their target sets through the practice of *takfir* (excommunication), thereby justifying the killing of large numbers of civilians and Muslims.¹⁶² However, this ideology is hypocritical, because while the Jihadi Salafists care about the *intentions* of the bomber blowing himself up as a reason he is not committing suicide, they care only about the *actions* of their targets and not their target’s intentions when justifying the killing of Muslims and civilians.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, 36.

¹⁶⁰ www.miraserve.com; Sykes-Picot refers to the secret agreement between France and Britain during World War I to divide the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence. It was one of the factors that shaped the contemporary Middle Eastern state system.

¹⁶¹ Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, 76.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁶³ Hafez, *The Alchemy of Martyrdom: Jihadi Salafism and Debates Over Suicide Bombings in the Muslim World*, 373.

The vast majority of Muslims, however, reject the whole practice of *takfir*, and scholars point out several *hadith* attributed to the prophet that explain that if a Muslim wrongly declares a fellow Muslim a *kufr* (infidel), he himself becomes a *kufr*. Even among Salafis there is disagreement on the practice of *takfir*. Some less radical argue that a Muslim ruler can only be declared an infidel if he institutes policies he knows to be against Islam and declares their superiority to God's laws. Others argue that to be excommunicated, one must justify his sins in public, or at a minimum, be given the opportunity to repent.¹⁶⁴

Perhaps the most complex justification that modern Salafists use to justify killing other Muslims and civilians involves a historic ruling of Islamic scholars regarding the killing of human shields. According to this tradition, it is permissible for Muslims to kill fellow Muslims if they are serving either willingly or unwillingly as human shields for invaders. AQI has manipulated this ruling with somewhat perverse logic to argue that coalition forces are essentially hiding behind civilians in public spaces and that if AQI were to stop the suicide bombings in order to prevent the death of civilians, the waging of *jihad* would end. The end of *jihad* would harm the entire 'collective' of the *umma* by allowing foreigners to control Muslim lands, exploit Muslim resources, and humiliate and persecute the entire Muslim nation. When ordinary Muslims are killed by martyrdom operations, it only results in 'private' harm against the individuals, while the attacks bring 'collective' benefit to the entire *umma*. Jihadi Salafists stretch the logic of this argument even further in order to justify the self-annihilation of suicide bombers. If Muslims can inflict harm on other Muslims to benefit the entire community, then certainly it is permissible to kill themselves to benefit Islam.¹⁶⁵

The acceptance of targeting civilians by Salafi-Jihadists appears to be a recent phenomenon, as earlier proponents of violent Salafism, such as Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb never argued civilians could be targeted. On the contrary, the Quran and *Sunna* contain

¹⁶⁴ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 101–02.

¹⁶⁵ Hafez, *The Alchemy of Martyrdom: Jihadi Salafism and Debates Over Suicide Bombings in the Muslim World*, 374–75.

many verses that admonish the protection of the sanctity of life and the prohibition against targeting non-combatants in warfare. Some radical Salafists disagree with their compatriots and argue there are strict rules that must be met before Muslims are allowed to kill fellow Muslims. Abu Basir al-Tartusi points out specifically, regarding the human shields rule, that there are four conditions that must be met before Muslims are allowed to kill other Muslims: 1) it must be impossible to fight the aggressor another way; 2) it must be clear that avoiding harm to the human shields would result in greater harm to Muslims; 3) the benefit from killing human shields must be absolutely clear, not just a possibility or probability; and 4) if the previous conditions are met, it is permissible to attack the enemy being shielded by the other Muslims, but the intent must be to attack the enemy, not the human shields.¹⁶⁶

Another way Salafi-Jihadists have lowered the bar on who can be targeted involves lowering the standard on what constitutes a supporter of the enemy. Because Western countries are typically democracies that elect their leaders who make decisions to go to war, the entire population of the country becomes valid targets. Bin Laden said, “War is a common responsibility among people and governments...The war is continuing and the people are renewing their loyalty to their rulers and politicians and sending their sons to the armies to fight us. They also continue their material and moral support, while our countries are burning, our homes are being bombed, and our people are being killed.”¹⁶⁷

Sometimes Salafi-Jihadists justify killing civilians by simply arguing that these civilians will someday harm Muslims. This logic was first used when Palestinian militants justified killing Israeli children; they argued that killing the children was justified, since they would someday grow up and join the Israeli Defense Forces where they would kill Muslims. Finally, sometimes Salafi-Jihadists will not even bother to find religious justifications for killing Muslims and civilians, arguing instead that the end

¹⁶⁶ Abu Basir al-Tartusi, ‘Warning Concerning Martyrdom or Suicide Operations,’ as quoted by Ibid., 376.

¹⁶⁷ Osama Bin Laden, as quoted by Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 103.

justifies the means. According to Zarqawi, “the shedding of Muslim blood...is allowed in order to avoid the greater evil of disrupting *jihad*.”¹⁶⁸ In these weakly-justified cases, the jihadists will emphasize that if the Muslims who were killed were innocent, they became martyrs and are already in heaven.¹⁶⁹ Suleiman Abu Gheith, a Kuwaiti Islamist who is considered one of Al Qaeda’s official spokesmen, when referring to the 9/11 hijackers, declared that “those youths that destroyed Americans with their planes, they did a good deed. There are thousands more young followers who look forward to death like Americans look forward to living.”¹⁷⁰

This rapid evolution of extremist Sunni ideology led Wiktorowicz to conclude that groups such as Al Qaeda have “broken new ground over the past decade or so to develop an expanded understanding about permissible targets in war.”¹⁷¹ The ideology of Al Qaeda and their justifications for targeting civilians and Muslims are also rejected by the very Shia scholars that originally pioneered the modernization of *jihad* and martyrdom operations. For example, Ayatollah Fadlallah denounced the September 11, 2001 attacks as “criminal-suicidal acts that constitute an ugly human genocide in all respects...these were not martyrdom acts...neither offensive nor defensive *jihad* justifies such acts that are denounced religiously.”¹⁷²

While there is some disagreement among Jihadi-Salafists on the implementation of martyrdom operations, there is a consensus that suicide missions are the ultimate sign of devotion to God. Jihadi-Salafists also acknowledge that they base the use of this tactic on the earlier legitimacy that religious scholars granted to its use against Israel. With so many scholars validating martyrdom operations against Israelis, the voices of the *ulama* who deplored suicide attacks, were marginalized and drowned out. Ironically, it was this

¹⁶⁸ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as quoted by Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 103.

¹⁶⁹ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 103.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 104–05.

¹⁷¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (March–April 2005), 87.

¹⁷² Joseph Alagha, “Hizbullah and Martyrdom,” *Orient* 45 (2004), 65.

failure to condemn the targeting of Israeli civilians that eventually led to the justifications for targeting Muslim civilians that we see in Iraq and other locales. It is also telling that Salafi-Jihadists care little about crafting theological justifications for suicide missions. Instead their writings and speeches focus almost exclusively on the virtues of martyrdom, a separate subject that engenders little debate and enjoys broad consensus amongst Islamic scholars.¹⁷³ Sunni scholars are also not as troubled as the Shia clerics were by the fact the bomber is killed in the attack; they accept the distinction between suicide from despair and suicide from jihad as being normatively different. They also do not attach a threshold for the death of the individual like Fadlallah did, that it must “convulse the enemy” and be worthy of the sacrifice of the individual. This is yet another indication that the Sunni extremists who employ suicide attacks know they are on shaky ideological ground and do not possess the scholarly credentials necessary to make the proper theological arguments.

¹⁷³ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 104.

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IV. CONCLUSION

Martyrdom, in summary, in our culture, contrary to other schools where it is considered to be an accident, an involvement, a death imposed upon a hero, a tragedy, is a grade, a level, a rank. It is not a means but it is a goal itself. It is originality. It is a completion. It is a lift. It itself is mid-way to the highest peak of humanity, and it is a culture. – Ali Shari'ati

Prior to 1994, martyrdom operations were almost exclusively employed by Shiites, and only when their homeland was threatened. This Shia exclusivity was understandable based on the 1,400-year historical tradition of martyrdom within Shia Islam. However, since that time, almost the exact opposite has been true with Sunni radicals not only greatly expanding the number of suicide attacks, but expanding the target set for the attacks to include non-combatants and specifically targeting Muslims as well. This shift occurred despite there being little historical basis for the veneration of martyrs in Sunni Islam since the Umayyad dynasty. One of the primary reasons for this paradigmatic shift lies with the differences in the religious clergy between Sunni and Shia Islam and the relationship with their respective populations. Where the hierarchal Shia *ulama* were able to restrain and then effectively end Hezbollah's use of suicide attacks, once the results were deemed not to be worthy of the sacrifice of the martyr, the Sunni *ulama* are far too fragmented and fearful of becoming even less relevant in the face of growing Islamic revivalism. Another reason for the difference seen in contemporary martyrdom operations is Sunni Islam's lack of a contiguous historical tradition of martyrdom. This lack of contiguous tradition has allowed radical Sunni elements to effectively rewrite their history concerning martyrdom, and create a culture of martyrdom to suit their contemporary political ambitions. With a fragmented and impotent Sunni *ulama* at the highest levels of scholarship, radical Sunni Salafi-Jihadists have now expanded the target set of martyrdom operations to include not only innocents and civilians, but even other Muslims, all of which is forbidden by the Quran. Unlike the Shia, the fact that Sunni groups, like Hamas, generate so much propaganda to quantify the rewards and glorify the act of their suicide bombers as martyrs can be seen as an

attempt to create new cultural frames that did not previously exist in the Sunni tradition. This Sunni propaganda was necessary in order to maintain the culture of martyrdom during the Palestinian Intifadas and to ensure a consistent societal framework from which to recruit future bombers. Even more telling is the fact that groups like Al Qaeda in Iraq do not always claim their suicide attacks, or produce the martyr propaganda to justify their suicide bombings, recognizing that there is currently no cultural frame in the greater Muslim community through which the deliberate targeting of Muslims with martyrdom operations is acceptable.

A. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

With the ending of Shia campaigns of suicide bombings in the 1980s, and with the virtual cessation of suicide attacks by Sunni Palestinian groups after the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, most suicide attacks being committed today are by terrorist groups that adhere to a radical Salafi-Jihadist ideology. While there are many physical security countermeasures, intelligence gathering practices and offensive deterrent policies that a state can implement to try and reduce the frequency of attacks, or the effectiveness of suicide bombers, it would not be appropriate to delve into those policy questions as this research focused on the historical basis and the contemporary theological justifications used in martyrdom operations.

However, it is here, in the realm of combating a faulty ideology that there may be a ray of hope. The more recent tragedies caused by Sunni extremists targeting civilians and Muslims using over-extended and faulty religious justifications, have caused a backlash within the Muslim community. There is evidence based on the widespread rejection of the atrocities of 9/11, the suicide bombings committed by Al Qaeda in Iraq, and other indiscriminate suicide bombings by Sunni extremists around the globe that the wider Muslim world is beginning to rethink whether suicide attacks actually constitute martyrdom operations. However, while it is in the United States' interest to nurture this growing rejection of suicide violence, we cannot be seen as doing so to the Muslim world. The reform of martyrdom ideology that supports indiscriminate killing must come from non-violent Salafists, Islamists and other moderate Muslims. In fact, Western

nations must tread extremely carefully in this nurturing effort in order to prevent a moderate Muslim scholar or leader from being labeled a lackey of the infidel West and losing all his credibility.

Along the lines of exposing the faulty ideology of martyrdom operations are a number of facts and themes moderate Muslims can highlight and promote: 1) Muslims are currently the primary victims of suicide attacks, so exactly how Muslims benefit from this is unclear; 2) extremists that kill fellow Muslims openly use the logic of “the ends justify the means,” which inherently cheapens the value of Muslim life; 3) the practice of *takfir* divides the Muslim community and risks a Muslim civil war; 4) suicide is forbidden in Islam and the Prophetic traditions that are used to provide exceptions to this prohibition are unconvincing and controversial, especially when combined with the body of evidence that individuals commit attacks for other than purely altruistic reasons; 5) there is growing evidence that some organizations that currently employ suicide bombings are exploiting young Muslims; 6) leaders of extremist organizations are hypocrites when they say martyrdom operations are the highest form of devotion one can show to God – if so, then why do the leaders never blow themselves up?; 7) many of the current advocates of suicide attacks lack the necessary religious training and authority to issue Islamic legal opinions; and 8) Salafi-Jihadists offer a bleak vision of the future, under strict *sharia* law, similar to what the Taliban imposed in Afghanistan – a future most Muslims reject.¹⁷⁴

While exposing the inconsistencies, the hypocrisy, and the tortured logic of current Islamist ideology that promotes martyrdom operations will not end the phenomenon of suicide bombing on its own, it is an important step in delegitimizing the practice, thereby reducing the appeal and potentially the frequency of future attacks.

¹⁷⁴ Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, 265-267.

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